The Kettering Review® is published by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799.

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ISSN 0748-8815
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Editor’s Letter

Long time readers of the Review will be familiar with our practice of plucking half-forgotten essays from the archives of democracy to illuminate the theme we have chosen for a given issue of the magazine. Yet this, as far as we can recall, will be the first volume for which we have arranged such not-exactly-random selections in the chronological order of their publication. Our theme this time is the community, and its problems in our democracy today. So we thought it might be of some interest to note how often, and under what circumstances over the past three-quarters of a century (which pretty well covers the lifespan of even our more senior readers!), thoughtful disciples of democracy have had cause of concern for the role of the community in our life as a people.

Let it be understood, at the outset, that when we talk about “the community” here, we have reference not to communities of interest, or of faith, or professions, or skills; rather our image is of groups of heterogeneous people who have nonetheless gathered, over time, in a given location, with others who, despite different experiences and cultures, share a need for security and the opportunity to develop their economy. Our interest is the regional community that is both social and political, a society and a polity. Such communities build themselves upon a sense of their citizens’ interdependence; they imply and create, over time, cultures of their own; but—perhaps especially in America over the past century or so—they have experienced increasingly a tension between the need, as a community, to address (on the one hand) the concerns that brought them together, but (on the other) the sometimes seemingly exclusive goals of individuals, the pursuit of which had led them to form community with strangers in the first place.

The first of our essays, from the 1920s, was a salvo by John Dewey in his argument with Walter Lippmann, who had advanced the notion that government in the modern world had grown so demandingly complex that it should be put in the hands of carefully selected experts—leaving the public to concentrate on more appropriate mundane matters, presumably. Well, Jefferson had seen the American democracy as rooted in communities of citizens, which he called “little republics”; so, similarly, Dewey, believing the public to be “supreme guide and criterion of governmental activity,” insists that “communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy.”
There’s no doubt in our minds that, in the argument with Lippmann, Dewey had the matter to rights. Yet looking back over decades from our present vantage point, it does sometimes seem that Lippmann, over the long haul, may have proved the winner. For just a couple of decades later, in the 1950s, the distinguished sociologist from Stanford, Robert Nisbet (who later, like Dewey himself, took a professorship at Columbia) published his profoundly influential book, *The Quest for Community*, in which he argued, persuasively and with eloquence, that discontinuity between our practice as individual citizens, the moral reference of our institutions (of which the family provides the example featured in the chapter we present), and the authority of government threatened to undermine Americans’ necessary sense of community.

As if to confirm the recognition that our survival as independent individuals itself depends upon an attachment to community, Elijah Anderson, just two decades later, uncovered the bare bones, as it were, of that interdependency, in a study he conducted in one of the poorer, least privileged, and most insecure urban communities in the country. Anderson is what we sometimes think of as an “anthropological” social scientist: that is to say, the researcher who, for a while, implants himself within a distinctive community whose patterns of life he proposes to study. The community that he selected in the 1970s was a poor, essentially black, “ghetto” community in the city of Chicago. The individuals whom he describes may well be long gone; even the ghetto that he sketches, granted the value of property and the impulse towards rebuilding in most American cities, may itself be no more. And the idiom in which he writes is reminiscent of patterns and persuasions of an increasingly distant time in America. Yet the influence that he describes of the generous “community” on the “individual” sense of identity, and of the coloring that a *public* perception gives to an *individual* self-image—these constitute reference points that remain instructive today.

Still, the tenuous community of Jelly’s tavern on the South Side of Chicago in the 1970s is a world away from Dewey’s “Great Society.” (Yes, Dewey used that Johnsonian phrase in the 1920s!) Indeed, at some moments it seems not far from the “pirates” whose continued existence, whose livelihood indeed, as Dewey observed, depends precisely upon their refusal to enter into community with others for a shared, or common good. The bicentennial era was not entirely a time of confident assurance: if civil rights had been affirmed, poverty had not been overcome; if *freedom* had become a byword, it was not always agreeably defined; and interde-
pendence, the substance of community, often seemed too readily sacrificed in the pursuit of independent success. That is why Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart* was then compelling—and sometimes controversial—reading. It proved then a most influential study of the culture of the American community, through whose instrumentality the American democracy had grown. So it seemed to us—if only as a cautionary gesture—appropriate to reprint an essay by Bellah in the 1990s that has a more somber tone and an apparent nervousness about the kind of polarization that is incipient among fundamentally like people, as is sometimes nowadays suggested in the metaphor of “reds” and “blues.”

We have, all of us, since the garden of Eden, shown ourselves likely to be selfish people. So it was particularly encouraging, in a book published just last year, to read an understanding and affectionate reaffirmation of those human instincts that push us towards community for the sake of our security and progress. Kwame Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* notes how significantly different cultures, when they find themselves together under similar circumstances, are quick to find common ground. And he reminds us that although riches and comforts are sometimes bought through the exploitation of others, they often also open greener pastures for the whole flock. One would not go to Appiah to find an exposition of the “trickle-down theory,” but with a knowledgeable, human sensitivity, he persuasively makes the case that human beings are drawn towards the association of others—to community.

The community’s fiber is woven of its histories, but it is not a monument to its past, nor even to its principles. The important recognition here is not that any mere community is valuable, but that community itself is a state of becoming. Thus Richard Harwood offers, in our final essay, some remarkable but by no means unique examples of communities—and the people within them—rediscovering inescapable interrelationships in the making of their contemporary lives. Creating community of the seemingly unalike, these communities are both social and civic, the polis on which democracy, even perhaps the Great Community of Dewey’s imagination, may ultimately depend.

Robert J. Kingston
Search for the Great Community

by John Dewey

“Community life is moral: that is, emotionally, intellectually, consciously sustained.”

That government exists to serve its community, and that this purpose cannot be achieved unless the community itself shares in selecting its governors and determining their policies, are a deposit of fact left, as far as we can see, permanently in the wake of doctrines and forms, however transitory the latter. They are not the whole of the democratic idea, but they express it in its political phase. Belief in this political aspect is not a mystic faith as if in some overruling providence that cares for children, drunkards, and others unable to help themselves. It marks a well-attested conclusion from historic facts. We have every reason to think that whatever changes may take place in existing democratic machinery, they will be of a sort to make the interest of the public a more supreme guide and criterion of governmental activity, and to enable the public to form and manifest its purposes still more authoritatively. In this sense, the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy.

The prime difficulty, as we have seen, is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile, and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests. This discovery is necessarily precedent to any fundamental change in the machinery. We are concerned therefore to set forth counsels as to advisable improvements in the political form of democracy. Many have been suggested. It is no derogation of their relative worth to say that consideration of these changes is not at present an affair of primary importance. The problem lies deeper; it is in the first instance
an intellectual problem—the search for conditions under which the Great Society may become the Great Community. When these conditions are brought into being they will make their own forms. Until they have come about, it is somewhat futile to consider what political machinery will suit them.

In a search for the conditions under which the inchoate public now extant may function democratically, we may proceed from a statement of the nature of the democratic idea in its generic social sense. From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share, according to capacity, in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain.

From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups. A member of a robber band may express his powers in a way consonant with belonging to that group and be directed by the interest common to its members. But he does so only at the cost of repression of those of his potentialities which can be realized only through membership in other groups. The robber band cannot interact flexibly with other groups, it can act only through isolating itself. It must prevent the operation of all interests save those which circumscribe it in its separateness. But a good citizen finds his conduct as a member of a political group enriching and enriched by his participation in family life, industry, scientific and artistic associations. There is a free give-and-take: fullness of integrated personality is therefore possible of achievement, since the pulls and responses of different groups reenforce one another and their values accord.

Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself. It is an idea in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of some thing which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected. Since things do not attain such fulfillment but are in actuality distracted and interfered with, democracy in this sense is not a fact and never will be. But neither in this sense is there or has there ever been anything which is a community in its full measure, a community unalloyed by alien elements. The idea or ideal of a community presents, however, actual phases of associated life as they are freed from restrictive and disturbing elements and are contemplated
as having attained their limit of development. Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being, just because it is a good shared by all, there is insofar a community. The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implication, constitutes the idea of democracy.

Only when we start from a community as a fact and grasp the fact in thought so as to clarify and enhance its constituent elements, can we reach an idea of democracy that is not utopian. The conceptions and shibboleths that are traditionally associated with the idea of democracy take on a veridical and directive meaning only when they are construed as marks and traits of an association which realizes the defining characteristics of a community.

Fraternity, liberty, and equality isolated from communal life are hopeless abstractions. Their separate assertion leads to mushy sentimentalism or else to extravagant and fanatical violence that in the end defeats its own aims. Equality then becomes a creed of mechanical identity which is false to facts and impossible of realization. Effort to attain it is divisive of the vital bonds that hold men together; as far as it puts forth issue, the outcome is a mediocrity in which good is common only in the sense of being average and vulgar. Liberty is then thought of as independence of social ties and ends in dissolution and anarchy. It is more difficult to sever the idea of brotherhood from that of a community, and hence it is either practically ignored in the movements which identify democracy with individualism, or else it is a sentimentally appended tag. In its just connection with communal experience, fraternity is another name for the consciously appreciated goods that accrue from an association in which all share, and which give direction to the conduct of each.

“The consciousness of a communal life constitutes the idea of democracy.”

Liberty is that secure release and fulfillment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others: the power to be an individualized self making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits of association. Equality denotes the unhampered share which each individual member of the community has in the consequences of associated action. It is equitable because it is measured only by need and capacity to utilize, not by extraneous factors which deprive one in order that another may take and have. A baby in the family is equal with others, not because of some antecedent and structural quality which is the same as that of others, but insofar as his needs for care and development are attended to without being sacrificed to the superior strength, possessions, and matured abilities of others. Equality does not signify that kind of mathematical or physical equivalence in virtue of which any one element may be substituted for another. It denotes effective regard for whatever is distinctive and unique in each, irrespective of physical and psychological inequalities. It is not a natural
possession but is a fruit of the community when its action is directed by its character as a community.

“The pulls and responses of different groups reenforce one another.”

Associated or joint activity is a condition of the creation of a community. But association itself is physical and organic, while community life is moral, that is emotionally, intellectually, consciously sustained. Human beings combine in behavior as directly and unconsciously as do atoms, stellar masses and cells; as directly and unknowingly as they divide and repel. They do so in virtue of their own structure, as man and woman unite, as the baby seeks the breast and the breast is there to supply its need. They do so from external circumstances, pressure from without, as atoms combine or separate in presence of an electric charge, or as sheep huddle together from the cold. Associated activity needs no explanation; things are made that way. But no amount of aggregated collective action of itself constitutes a community.

For beings who observe and think, and whose ideas are absorbed by impulses and become sentiments and interests, “we” is as inevitable as “I.” But “we” and “our” exist only when the consequences of combined action are perceived and become an object of desire and effort, just as “I” and “mine” appear on the scene only when a distinctive share in mutual action is consciously asserted or claimed. Human associations may be ever so organic in origin and firm in operation, but they develop into societies in a human sense only as their consequences, being known, are esteemed and sought for. Even if “society” were as much an organism as some writers have held, it would not on that account be society. Interactions, transactions, occur de facto and the results of interdependence follow. But participation in activities and sharing in results are additive concerns. They demand communication as a prerequisite.

Combined activity happens among human beings; but when nothing else happens it passes as inevitably into some other mode of interconnected activity as does the interplay of iron and the oxygen of water. What takes place is wholly describable in terms of energy, or, as we say in the case of human interactions, of force. Only when there exist signs or symbols of activities and of their outcome can the flux be viewed as from without, be arrested for consideration and esteem, and be regulated. Lightning strikes and rives a tree or rock and the resulting fragments take up and continue the process of interaction, and so on and on. But when phases of the process are represented by signs, a new medium is interposed. As symbols are related to one another, the important relations of a course of events are recorded and are preserved as meanings. Recollection and foresight are possible; the new medium facilitates calculation, planning, and a new kind of action which intervenes in what happens to direct its course in the interest of what is foreseen and desired. Symbols in turn depend upon and promote communication. The results of conjoint experience are considered and transmitted. Events cannot be passed from one to another, but meanings may be shared by means of signs. Wants and impulses are then attached to com-
mon meanings. They are thereby transformed into desires and purposes, which, since they implicate a common or mutually understood meaning, present new ties, converting a conjoint activity into a community of interest and endeavor. Thus there is generated what, metaphorically, may be termed a general will and social consciousness: desire and choice on the part of individuals on behalf of activities that, by means of symbols, are communicable and shared by all concerned. A community thus presents an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action. “Force” is not eliminated but is transformed in use and direction by ideas and sentiments made possible by means of symbols.

The work of conversion of the physical and organic phase of associated behavior into a community of action, saturated and regulated by mutual interest in shared meanings, consequences that are translated into ideas and desired objects by means of symbols, does not occur all at once nor completely. At any given time, it sets a problem rather than marks a settled achievement. We are born organic beings associated with others, but we are not born members of a community. The young have to be brought within the traditions, outlook and interests that characterize a community by means of education; by unremitting instruction and by learning in connection with the phenomena of overt association. Everything which is distinctively human is learned, not native, even though it could not be learned without native structures that mark man off from other animals. To learn in a human way and to human effect is not just to acquire added skill through refinement of original capacities.

To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values. But this translation is never finished. The old Adam, the unregenerate element in human nature, persists. It shows itself wherever the method obtains of attaining results by use of force instead of by the method of communication and enlightenment…. To the doctrine of “natural” economy, which held that commercial exchange would bring about such an interdependence that harmony would automatically result, Rousseau gave an adequate answer in advance. He pointed out that interdepend-
ence provides just the situation that makes it possible and worthwhile for the stronger and abler to exploit others for their own ends, to keep others in a state of subjection where they can be utilized as animated tools. … It indicates the nature of the only possible solution: the perfecting of the means and ways of communication of meanings so that genuinely shared interest in the consequences of interdependent activities may inform desire and effort and thereby direct action. …

… What are the conditions under which it is possible for the Great Society to approach more closely and vitally the status of a Great Community and thus take form in genuinely democratic societies and state? What are the conditions under which we may reasonably picture the Public emerging from its eclipse? …

… Two essential constituents in that older theory, as will be recalled, were the notions that each individual is of himself equipped with the intelligence needed, under the operation of self-interest, to engage in political affairs; and that general suffrage, frequent elections of officials and majority rule are sufficient to ensure the responsibility of elected rulers to the desires and interest of the public. As we shall see, the second conception is logically bound up with the first and stands or falls with it. At the basis of the scheme lies what Lippmann has well called the idea of the “omnicompetent” individual: competent to frame policies, to judge their results; competent to know in all situations demanding political action what is for his own good; and competent to enforce his idea of good and the will to effect it against contrary forces. Subsequent history has proved that the assumption involved illusion.

Had it not been for the misleading influence of a false psychology, the illusion might have been detected in advance. But current philosophy held that ideas and knowledge were functions of a mind or consciousness which originated in individuals by means of isolated contact with objects. But in fact, knowledge is a function of association and communication: it depends upon tradition, upon tools, methods socially transmitted, developed, and sanctioned. Faculties of effectual observation, reflection, and desire are habits acquired under the influence of the culture and institutions of society, not ready-made inherent powers. The fact that man acts from crudely intelligized emotion and from habit rather than from rational consideration is now so familiar that it is not easy to appreciate that the other idea was taken seriously as the basis of economic and political philosophy. The measure of truth which it contains was derived from observation of a relatively small group of shrewd businessmen who regulated their enterprises by calculation and accounting, and of citizens of small and stable local communities who were so intimately acquainted with the persons and affairs of their locality that they could pass competent judgment upon the bearing of proposed measures upon their own concerns.

Habit is the mainspring of human action, and habits are formed for the most part under the influence of the customs of a group. The organic structure of man entails the formation
of habit, for, whether we wish it or not, whether we are aware of it or not, every act effects a modification of attitude and set that directs future behavior. The dependence of habit-forming upon those habits of a group which constitute customs and institutions is a natural consequence of the helplessness of infancy…. The influence of habit is decisive because all distinctively human action has to be learned, and the very heart, blood, and sinews of learning is creation of habitues. Habits bind us to orderly and established ways of action because they generate ease, skill, and interest in things to which we have grown used and because they instigate fear to walk in different ways, and because they leave us incapacitated for the trial of them. Habit does not preclude the use of thought, but it determines the channels within which it operates. Thinking is secreted in the interstices of habits. The sailor, miner, fisherman, and farmer think, but their thoughts fall within the framework of accustomed occupations and relationships. We dream beyond the limits of use and wont, but only rarely does reverie become a source of acts that break bounds; so rarely that we name those in whom it happens demonic geniuses and marvel at the spectacle. Thinking itself becomes habitual along certain lines; a specialized occupation…. Hence the idea that men are moved by an intelligent and calculated regard for their own good is pure mythology. Even if the principle of self-love actuated behavior, it would still be true that the objects in which men find their love manifested, the objects that they take as constituting their peculiar interests, are set by habits reflecting social customs…. 

… These facts explain why the more things changed, the more they were the same; they account, that is, for the fact that instead of the sweeping revolution which was expected to result from democratic political machinery, there was in the main but a transfer of vested power from one class to another. A few men, whether or not they were good judges of their own true interest and good, were competent judges of the conduct of business for pecuniary profit, and of how the new governmental machinery could be made to serve their ends. It would have taken a new race of human beings to escape, in the use made of political forms, from the influence of deeply engrained habits, of old institutions and customary forms, with their inwrought limitations of expectation, desire, and demand…. 

… Opinions and beliefs concerning the public presuppose effective and organized inquiry. Unless there are methods for detecting the energies which are at work and tracing them through an intricate network of interactions to their consequences, what passes as public opinion will be “opinion” in its derogatory sense rather than truly public, no matter how widespread the opinion is. The number who share error as to fact and who partake of a false belief measures power for harm. Opinion casually formed, and formed under the direction of those who have something
at stake in having a lie believed, can be public opinion only in name. Calling it by this name, acceptance of the name as a kind of warrant, magnifies its capacity to lead action astray. The more who share it, the more injurious its influence. Public opinion, even if it happens to be correct, is intermittent when it is not the product of methods of investigation and reporting constantly at work. It appears only in crises. Hence its “rightness” concerns only an immediate emergency. Its lack of continuity makes it wrong from the standpoint of the course of events. It is as if a physician were able to deal for the moment with an emergency in disease but could not adapt his treatment of it to the underlying conditions that brought it about. He may then “cure” the disease—that is, cause its present alarming symptoms to subside—but he does not modify its causes; his treatment may even affect them for the worse. Only continuous inquiry, continuous in the sense of being connected as well as persistent, can provide the material of enduring opinion about public matters.

There is a sense in which “opinion” rather than knowledge, even under the most favorable circumstances, is the proper term to use—namely, in the sense of judgment, estimate. For in its strict sense, knowledge can refer only to what has happened and been done. What is still to be done involves a forecast of a future still contingent, and cannot escape the liability to error in judgment involved in all anticipation of probabilities. There may well be honest divergence as to policies to be pursued, even when plans spring from knowledge of the same facts. But genuinely public policy cannot be generated unless it be informed by knowledge, and this knowledge does not exist except when there is systematic, thorough, and well-equipped search and record.…

… The political forms of democracy and quasi-democratic habits of thought on social matters have compelled a certain amount of public discussion and at least the simulation of general consultation in arriving at political decisions. Representative government must at least seem to be founded on public interests as they are revealed to public belief. The days are past when government can be carried on without any pretense of ascertaining the wishes of the governed. In theory, their assent must be secured. Under the older forms, there was no need to muddy the sources of opinion on political matters. No current of energy flowed from them. Today the judgments popularly formed on political matters are

“We are not born members of a community.”
so important, in spite of all factors to the contrary, that there is an enormous premium upon all methods that affect their formation.

The smoothest road to control of political conduct is by control of opinion. As long as interests of pecuniary profit are powerful, and a public has not located and identified itself, those who have this interest will have an unresisted motive for tampering with the springs of political action in all that affects them. Just as, in the conduct of industry and exchange, generally the technological factor is obscured, deflected and defeated by “business,” so specifically in the management of publicity. The gathering and sale of subject-matter having a public import is part of the existing pecuniary system. Just as industry conducted by engineers on a factual technological basis would be a very different thing from what it actually is, so the assembling and reporting of news would be a very different thing if the genuine interests of reporters were permitted to work freely.

One aspect of the matter concerns particularly the side of dissemination. It is often said, and with a great appearance of truth, that the freeing and perfecting of inquiry would not have any especial effect. For, it is argued, the mass of the reading public is not interested in learning and assimilating the results of accurate investigation. Unless these are read, they cannot seriously affect the thought and action of members of the public; they remain in secluded library alcoves, and are studied and understood only by a few intellectuals. The objection is well taken save as the potency of art is taken into account. A technical high-brow presentation would appeal only to those technically high-brow; it would not be news to the masses. Presentation is fundamentally important, and presentation is a question of art. A newspaper which was only a daily edition of a quarterly journal of sociology or political science would undoubtedly possess a limited circulation and a narrow influence. Even at that, however, the mere existence and accessibility of such material would have some regulative effect. But we can look much further than that. The material would have such an enormous and widespread human bearing that its bare existence would be an irresistible invitation to a presentation of it that would have a direct popular appeal. The freeing of the artist in literary presentation, in other words, is as much a precondition of the desirable creation of adequate opinion on public matters as is the freeing of social inquiry. Men’s conscious life of opinion and judgment often proceeds on a superficial and trivial plane. But their lives reach a deeper level. The func-

“Knowledge is a function of association and communication.”
tion of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art. Poetry, the drama, the novel, are proofs that the problem of presentation is not insoluble. Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception, and appreciation.

We have but touched lightly and in passing upon the conditions which must be fulfilled if the Great Society is to become a Great Community: a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being…

The Problem of Community

by Robert Nisbet

“This is an age of economic interdependence and welfare states, but it is also an age of spiritual insecurity and preoccupation with moral certainty. Why is this? Why has the quest for community become the dominant social tendency of the 20th century? What are the forces that have conspired, at the very peak of three centuries of economic and political advancement, to make the problem of community more urgent in the minds of men than it has been since the last days of the Roman Empire?

The answer is of course complex. Any effort to resolve the conflicting imperatives of an age into a simple set of institutional dislocations is both vapid and illusory. The conflicts of any age are compounded of immediate cultural frustrations and of timeless spiritual cravings. Attempts to reduce the latter to facile sociological and psychological categories are absurd and pathetic. Whatever else the brilliant literature of political disillusionment of our day has demonstrated, it has made clear the efforts to translate all spiritual problems into secular terms are fraught with stultification as well as tyranny.

The problem before us is in one sense moral. It is moral in that it is closely connected with the values and ends that have traditionally guided and united people but that have in so many instances become remote and inaccessible. We do not have to read deeply in the philosophy and literature of today to sense the degree to which our age has come to seem a period of moral and spiritual chaos, of certainties abandoned, of creeds outworn, and of values devalued. The disenchantment of the world, foreseen by certain

“Informal, interpersonal relationships have ceased to play a determining role in our institutional systems.”
19th-century conservatives as the end result of social and spiritual tendencies then becoming dominant, is very much with us. The humane skepticism of the early 20th century has already been succeeded in many quarters by a new Pyrrhonism that strikes at the very roots of thought itself. Present disenchantment would be no misfortune were it set in an atmosphere of confident attack upon the old and search for the new. But it is not confident, only melancholy and guilty. Along with it are to be seen the drives to absolute certainty which are the invariable conditions of rigid despotism.

The problem is also intellectual. It cannot be separated from tendencies in Western thought that are as old as civilization itself, tendencies luminously revealed in the writings of Plato, Seneca, Augustine, and all their intellectual children. These are profound tendencies. We cannot avoid, any of us, seeing the world in ways determined by the very words we have inherited from other ages. Not a little of the terminology of alienation and community in our day comes directly from the writings of the philosophical and religious conservatives of other centuries. The problem constituted by the present quest for community is composed of elements as old as humankind, elements of faith and agonizing search that are vivid in all the great prophetic literatures. In large degree, the quest for community is timeless and universal.

Nevertheless, the shape and intensity of the quest for community varies from age to age. For generations, even centuries, it may lie mute, covered over and given gratification by the securities found in institutions like family, village, class, or some other type of association. In other ages, ages of sudden change and dislocation, the quest for community becomes conscious and even clamant. It is this in our own age. To dismiss the present quest for community with vague references to the revival of tribalism, to humanity’s still incomplete emancipation from conditions supposedly “primitive,” is to employ substitutes for genuine analysis, substitutes drawn from the 19th-century philosophy of unilinear progress. Moral imperatives, our own included, always hold a significant relation to present institutional conditions. They cannot be relegated to the past.

The ominous preoccupation with community revealed by modern thought and mass behavior is a manifestation of certain profound dislocations in the primary associative areas of society, dislocations that have been created to a great extent by the structure of the Western
political State. As it is treated here, the problem is social—social in that it pertains to the statuses and social memberships that people hold, or seek to hold. But the problem is also political—political in that it is a reflection of the present location and distribution of power in society.

It has become commonplace to refer to social disorganization and moral isolation in the present age. These terms are usually made to cover a diversity of conditions. But in a society as complex as ours it is unlikely that all aspects are undergoing a similar change. Thus it can scarcely be said that the State, as a distinguishable relationship among men, is today undergoing disorganization, for in most countries, including the United States, it is the political relationship that has been and is being enhanced above all other forms of connection among individuals. The contemporary State, with all its apparatus of bureaucracy, has become more powerful, more cohesive, and is endowed with more functions than at any time in its history.

Nor can the great impersonal relationships of the many private and semi-public organizations—educational, charitable, economic—be said to be experiencing any noticeable decline or disintegration. Large-scale labor organizations, political parties, welfare organizations, and corporate associations based upon property and exchange show a continued and even increasing prosperity, at least when measured in terms of institutional significance. It may be true that these organizations do not offer the degree of individual identification that makes for a deep sense of social cohesion, but disorganization is hardly the word for these immense and influential associations which govern the lives of tens of millions of people.

We must be no less wary of terms such as the lost, isolated, or unattached individual. However widespread the contemporary ideology of alienation may be, it would be blindness to miss the fact that it flourishes amid an extraordinary variety of custodial and redemptive agencies. Probably never in all history have so many organizations, public and private, made the individual the center of bureaucratic and institutionalized regard. Quite apart from the innumerable agencies of private welfare, the whole tendency of modern political development has been to enhance the role of the political State as a direct relationship among individuals and to bring both its powers and its services ever more intimately into the lives of human beings.

Where, then, are the dislocations and the deprivations that have driven so many individuals, in this age of economic abundance and political welfare, to the quest for community, to narcotic relief from the sense of isolation and anxiety? They lie in the realm of the small, primary, personal relationships of society—the relationships that mediate directly between the individual and the larger world of economic, moral, and political and religious values. Our problem may be ultimately concerned with all of these values and their greater or lesser accessibility to persons, but it is, I think, primarily social: social in the exact sense of pertaining to

“Traditional primary relationships have become functionally irrelevant to our State.”
the small areas of membership and association in which these values are ordinarily made meaningful and directive to people.

Behind the growing sense of isolation in society, behind the whole quest for community, which infuses so many theoretical and practical areas of contemporary life and thought, lies the growing realization that traditional primary relationships have become functionally irrelevant to our State and economy and meaningless to the moral aspirations of individuals. We are forced to the conclusion that a great deal of the peculiar character of contemporary social action comes from the efforts of people to find in larger-scale organizations the values of status and security which were formerly gained in the primary associations of family, neighborhood, and church. This is the fact, I believe, that is as revealing of the source of many of our contemporary discontents as it is ominous when the related problems of political freedom and order are considered.

Historically, our problem must be seen in terms of the decline in functional and psychological significance of such groups as the family, the small local community, and the various other traditional relationships that have immemorially mediated between the individual and his society. These are the groups that have been morally decisive in the concrete lives of individuals. Other and more powerful forms of association have existed, but the major moral and psychological influences on the individual’s life have emanated from the family and local community and the church. Within such groups have been engendered the primary types of identification: affection, friendship, prestige, recognition. And within them also have been engendered or intensified the principal incentives of work, love, prayer, and devotion to freedom and order.

This is the area of association from which the individual commonly gains his concept of the outer world and his sense of position in it. His concrete feelings of status and role, of protection and freedom, his differentiation between good and bad, between order and disorder and guilt and innocence, arise and are shaped largely by his relations within this realm of primary association. What was once called instinct or the social nature of man is but the product of this sphere of interpersonal relationships. It contains and cherishes not only the formal moral precept but what Whitehead has called “our vast system of inherited symbolism.”

It is to this area of relations that the adjective disorganized is most often flung by contemporary social scientists and moralists, and it is unquestionably in this area that most contem-
temporary sensations of cultural dissolution arise. Yet the term *disorganization* is not an appropriate one and tends to divert attention from the basic problem of the social group in our culture. It has done much to fix attention on those largely irrelevant manifestations of delinquent behavior which are fairly constant in all ages and have little to do with our real problem.

The term *disorganization* has been a persistent one in social science, and there is even now a deplorable tendency to use terms like *disintegration* and *disorganization* when there is no demonstrable breakdown of a structure and no clear norm from which to calculate supposed deviations of conduct. The family and the community have been treated as disintegrating entities with no clear insight into which relationships are actually disintegrating. A vast amount of attention has been given to such phenomena like martial unhappiness, prostitution, juvenile misbehavior, and the sexual life of the unmarried, on the curious assumption that these are “pathological” and derive clearly from the breakdown of the family.

But in any intelligible sense of the word it is not disorganization that is crucial to the problem of the family or of any other signifi-
cant social group in our society. The most fundamental problem has to do with the organized associations of men. It has to do with the role of the primary social group in an economy and political order whose principal ends have come to be structured in such a way that the primary social relationships are increasingly functionless, almost irrelevant, with respect to these ends. What is involved, most deeply in our problem is the diminishing capacity of organized, traditional relationships for holding a position of moral and psychological centrality in the individual’s life.

*Interpersonal relationships doubtless exist as abundantly in our age as in any other. But it is becoming apparent that for more and more people such relationships are morally empty and psychologically baffling. It is not simply that old relationships have waned in psychological influence; it is that new forms of primary relationships show, with rare exceptions, little evidence of offering even as much psychological and moral meaning for the individual as do the old ones. For more and more individuals the primary social relationships have lost much of their historic function of mediation between themselves and the larger ends of our civilization. But the decline of effective meaning is itself a part of a more fundamental change in the role of groups like the family and local community. At bottom, social organization is a pattern of institutional functions into which are woven numerous psychological threads of meaning, loyalty, and interdependence. The contemporary sense of alienation is most directly perhaps a problem in symbols and meanings, but it is also a problem in the institutional functions of the relationships that*
ordinarily communicate integration and purpose to individuals.

In earlier times, and even today in diminishing localities, there was an intimate relationship between the local, kinship, and religious groups within which individuals consciously lived and the major economic, charitable, and protective functions that are indispensable to human existence. There was an intimate conjunction of larger institutional goals and the social groups small enough to infuse the individual’s life with a sense of membership in society and the meaning of the basic moral values. For the overwhelming majority of people, until quite recently, the structure of economic and political life rested upon, and even presupposed, the existence of the small social and local groups within which the cravings for psychological security and identification could be satisfied.

Family, church, local community drew and held the allegiances of individuals in earlier times not because of any superior impulses to love and protect, or because of any greater natural harmony of intellectual and spiritual values, or even because of any superior internal organization, but because these groups possessed a virtually indispensable relation to the economic and political order. The social problems of birth and death, courtship and marriage, employment and unemployment, infirmity and old age were met, however inadequately at times, through the associative means of these social groups. In consequence, a whole ideology, reflected in popular literature, custom, and morality, testified to the centrality of kinship and localism.

Our present crisis lies in the fact that whereas the small traditional associations, founded upon kinship, faith, or locality, are still expected to communicate to individuals the principal moral ends and psychological gratifications of society, they have manifestly become detached from positions of functional relevance to the larger economic and political decisions of our society. Family, local community, church, and the whole network of informal interpersonal relationships have ceased to play a determining role in our institutional systems of mutual aid, welfare, education, recreation, and economic production and distribution. Yet despite the loss of these manifest institutional functions, and the failure of most of these groups to develop any new institutional functions, we continue to expect them to perform adequately the implicit psychological or symbolic functions in the life of the individual.

When the major institutional functions have disappeared from a local village government or from a sub-caste, the conditions are laid for the decline of the individual’s allegiance to the older forms of organization. Failing to find any institutional

“The old order is inadequate to the demand.”
substance in the old unities of social life, he is prone to withdraw, consciously or unconsciously, his loyalty to them. They no longer represent the prime moral experiences of his life. He finds himself, mentally, looking in new directions.

“The family has progressed from institution to companionship.”

Some of the most extreme instances of insecurity and conflict of values in native cultures have resulted not from the nakedly ruthless forces of economic exploitation but from most commendable (by Western standards) acts of humanitarian reform. Thus the introduction of so physically salutary a measure as an irrigation district or medical service may be attended by all the promised gains in abundance and health, but such innovations can also bring about the most complex disruptions of social relationships and allegiances. Why? Because such systems, by the very humaness of their functions, assume values that no purely exploitative agency can; and having become values they more easily serve to alienate the native from his devotion to the meanings associated with obsolete functional structures. The new technology means the creation of new centers of administrative authority which not infrequently nullify the prestige of village or caste groups, leading in time to a growing conflict between the moral meaning of the old areas of authority and the values associated with the new.

It is no part of my intent to offer these observations in any spirit of lament for the old. It is an evident conclusion that for technical as well as moral reasons much of the old order is inadequate to the demand constituted by population density and other factors. It is important to insist, however, that the solution by new administrative measures of technical and material problems does not carry with it any automatic answer to the social and moral difficulties created by the invasion of ancient areas of function. The displacement of function must lead in the long run to the diminution of moral significance in the old; this means the loss of accustomed centers of allegiance, belief, and incentive. Hence the widely observed spectacle of masses of “marginal” personalities in native cultures, of individuals adrift, encompassed by, but not belonging to, either the old or the new. New associations have risen and continue to arise, but their functional value is still but dimly manifest for the greater number of people, and their moral and psychological appeal is correspondingly weak. Hence the profound appeal of what the great Indian philosopher Tagore called “the powerful anesthetic of nationalism.”
Nowhere is the concern with the problem of community in Western society more intense than with respect to the family. The contemporary family, as countless books, articles, college courses, and marital clinics make plain, has become an obsessive problem. The family inspires a curious dualism of thought. We tend to regard it uneasily as a final manifestation of tribal society somehow inappropriate to a democratic, industrial age, but, at the same time, we have become ever more aware of its possibilities as an instrument of social reconstruction.

The intensity of theoretical interest in the family has curiously enough risen in direct proportion to the decline of the family’s basic institutional importance to our culture. The present “problem” of the family is dramatized by the fact that its abstract importance to the moralist or psychologist has grown all the while that its tangible institutional importance to the economy and State have diminished.

Historically the family’s importance has come from the fact of intimate social cohesion united with institutional significance in society, not from its sex or blood relationships. In earlier ages, kinship was inextricably involved in the processes of getting a living, providing education, supporting the infirm, caring for the aged, and maintaining religious values. In vast rural areas, until quite recently, the family was the actual agency of economic production, distribution, and consumption. Even in towns and cities, the family long retained its close relation to these obviously crucial activities. Organized living was simply inconceivable, for the most part, outside of the context provided by kinship. Few individuals were either too young or too old to find a place of importance within the group, a fact which enhanced immeasurably the family’s capacity for winning allegiance and providing symbolic integration for the individual.

But in ever-enlarging areas of population in modern times, the economic, legal, educational, religious, and recreational functions of the family have declined or diminished. Politically, membership in the family is superfluous; economically, it is regarded by many as an outright hindrance to success. The family, as someone has put it, is now the accident of the worker rather than his essence. His competitive position may be more favorable without it. Our systems of law and education and all the manifold recreational activities of individuals come to rest upon, and to be directed to, the individual, not the family. On all sides we continue to celebrate from pulpit and rostrum the indispensability of the family to the economy and the State. But, in plain fact, the family is indispensable to neither of these at the present time. The major processes of economy and political administration have become increasingly independent of the symbolism and integrative activities of kinship.
There is an optimistic apologetics that sees in this waning of the family’s institutional importance only the beneficent hand of Progress. We are told by certain psychologists and sociologists that, with its loss of economic and legal functions, the family has been freed of all that is basically irrelevant to its “real” nature; that the true function of the family—the cultivation of affection, the shaping of personality, above all, the manufacture of adjustment—is now in a position to flourish illimitably, to the greater glory of humanity and society. In a highly popular statement, we are told that the family has progressed from institution to companionship.

But, as Ortega y Gasset has written, “People do not live together merely to be together. They live together to do something together.” To suppose that the present family, or any other group, can perpetually vitalize itself through some indwelling affectional tie, in the absence of concrete, perceived functions, is like supposing that the comradely ties of mutual aid which grow up incidentally in a military unit will long outlast a condition in which war is plainly and irrevocably banished. Applied to the family, the argument suggests that affection and personality cultivation can somehow exist in a social vacuum, unsupported by the determining goals and ideals of economic and political society. But in hard fact, no social group will long survive the disappearance of its chief reasons for being, and these reasons are not, primarily, biological but institutional. Unless new institutional functions are performed by a group—family, trade union, or church—its psychological influence will become minimal.

No amount of veneration for the psychological functions of a social group, for the capacity of the group to gratify cravings for security and recognition, will offset the fact that, however important these functions may be in any given individual’s life, he does not join the group essentially for them. He joins the group if and when its larger institutional or intellectual functions have relevance both to his own life organization and to what he can see of the group’s relation to the larger society. The individual may indeed derive vast psychic support and integration from the pure fact of group membership, but he will not long derive this when he becomes in some way aware of the gulf between the moral claims of a group and its actual institutional importance in the social order.

The late sociologist, Robert Nisbet, was professor at Stanford and Columbia universities and the author of more than a dozen books, including the classic, The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom (1953), from which this essay is drawn.
Urban taverns and bars, like barbershops, carry-outs, and other such establishments, with their adjacent street corners and alleys, serve as important gathering places. The urban poor and working-class people are likely to experience their local taverns as much more than commercial businesses. They provide settings for sociability and places where neighborhood residents can gain a sense of self-worth. Here people can gather freely, bargaining with their limited resources, their symbols of status, and their personal sense of who and what they are, against the resources of their peers and against what their peers see them really to be. Here they can sense themselves to be among equals, with an equal chance to be somebody, even to be occasional winners in the competition for social esteem. This is their place. They set the social standards. And when they feel those standards are threatened, they can defend them.

Jelly’s, the subject of this study, is a bar and liquor store located in a rundown building on the South Side of Chicago. A few doors away from Jelly’s is a laundromat; down the street are a dry cleaner, a grocery store, and, farther on, a poolroom. As cars and buses pass, their passengers sometimes gawk at the people of Jelly’s. From the safety of their cars, often with rolled-up windows and locked doors, passersby can see “wineheads” staggering along; a man in tattered clothing “nodding out,” leaning on Jelly’s front window; and a motley, tough-looking group of men gathered on the corner, sometimes with a rare white man among them. Those on foot hurry

“A sense of place in this social order … emerges through social interaction.”
past, not wanting to be accosted by the people of Jelly’s.

Periodically, the humdrum routine is punctuated with some excitement. An elderly black woman bursts out of Jelly’s, clutching her jug of wine and her pocketbook as she hurries along, minding her own business. The group on the sidewalk comes to life as one of the men grabs her purse and yells, “Gimme some o’ what you got there, woman!” “I’ll geh ya’ this fist upside yo’ head!” she responds, shaking her fist and confidently moving on about her business. Children play nearby and among the men. They rip and run up and down the street and occasionally stop a man, apparently unmindful of how he looks, to say, “Got a quarter, mister?” The man bends over, puts his hands on his knees, negating any “tough” look he might have had, and begins to kid with the children, teaching them about being “good li’l kids” and giving up a quarter or whatever he can spare.

After being around Jelly’s neighborhood for a while and getting to know its people, the outside observer can begin to see that there is order to this social world. For example, the wineheads turn out to be harmless, for they generally do the things people expect them to do: they drink on the street, beg passersby for change, and sometimes stumble up and down the street cursing at others. One also begins to understand that what looks like a fight to the death usually doesn’t come near a fatal end. Often such a “fight” turns out to be a full-dress game in which only “best friends” or “cousins” can participate—but at times even they can’t play this game without its ending in a real fight. After a while one gets to know that old black woman, leaving Jelly’s with the “taste,” as Mis’ Lu, “a nice ol’ lady who been ‘round here fo’ years,” and “studs ‘round dese here streets’ll cut yo’ throat ‘bout messin’ with her. She hope raise half the cats ‘round here.” Secure in her knowledge of how she is regarded, she walks the streets unafraid, “back talking” to anyone “messin’” with her.

But once inside Jelly’s, people don’t have to be concerned with the conditions outside. They become involved as soon as they meet others on the corner, or as soon as they walk through Jelly’s door. Somebody is waiting at least to acknowledge their presence, if not to greet them warmly. They come here “to see what’s happenin’”—to keep up on the important news. They meet their “runnin’ buddies” here, and sometimes they commune with others. Inside, or outside on the corner, they joke, argue, fight, and laugh, as issues quickly rise and fall. In this milieu it is time out and time away from things outside. It is time in for sharing one’s joys, hopes, dreams, troubles, fears, and past triumphs, which are all here
and now to be taken up repeatedly with peers whose thoughts about them really matter.

As this short description indicates, there is more to social life in and around Jelly’s than might be suggested by a cursory inspection, informed by the stereotypes and prejudices of those not involved. Life here cannot be understood as simple “social disorganization.” Nor can one reach a full understanding by viewing social relations here simply as “effortless sociability.” When one gets close to the life of Jelly’s and develops the necessary meaningful relations with its people, he can begin to understand the social order of this world. People make him aware of the general prescriptions and proscriptions of behavior by somehow fitting him in, including him as they attempt to sort out and come to terms with their minute-to-minute, ordinary everyday social events. Individuals are thus seen acting collectively, interpreting and defining one another; they make distinctions between and among those with whom they share this social space. They are seen fitting themselves in with one another’s expectations and collective lines of action, each one informed by a sense of what actions are allowed and not allowed to different kinds of people in varying sets of circumstances.

“Acting collectively, individuals interpret and define one another.”

Jelly’s bar and liquor store has two front entrances, one leading to the barroom and the other to the liquor store. Each room has its own distinctive social character. The barroom is a public place; outfitted with bar stools, a marble-topped counter, and mirrors on the wall, it invites almost anyone to come in and promises he will not be bothered as long as he mindshis own business. In this sense, it is a neutral social area. Yet people who gather on this side of Jelly’s tend to be cautiously reserved when approaching others, mainly because on this side they just don’t know one another. In contrast, the liquor store is more of a place for peers to hang out and outwardly appears to have a more easygoing, spontaneous ambience.

An open doorway separates the two rooms, and some people gravitate from side to side, the regular clientele usually settling in the liquor store. The social space of the barroom is shared by regular customers and visitors. Sometimes these visitors are people who have been seen around Jelly’s but who have yet to commit themselves to the setting. Sometimes they are total strangers. At times there will be
as many as 20 visitors present, compared with 8 or 9 regular customers. Regular customers are interspersed among the visitors, but though the space is shared, they seldom come to know one another well. The visitors tend to arrive, get their drinks, sit at the bar for a while, then leave. The regular clientele, on the other hand, do their best to ignore the visitors; they treat them as interlopers. And there exists a certain amount of distrust and suspicion between the two groups.

Owing to this suspicion and distrust, the barroom is characterized by a somewhat cautious and reserved atmosphere. When strangers accidentally touch or bump one another, the person in the wrong quickly says, “scuse me.” On occasions when the “scuse me” is not forthcoming and further aggression seems likely, other precautionary measures may be taken. One night during the early stages of my fieldwork, when I was talking with John, a visitor I had just met, a stranger to both of us seemed drunk and unruly. He tried to enter our conversation. Putting his hand on John’s shoulder, he asked, “What ya’ll drinkin’? Lemme’ drink wit you!” John tried to ignore the man, but he persisted. Abruptly and firmly John said, “Al’ right, now. Man, I don’t know you, now! I don’t know you.” Taking this comment as the warning it was, the stranger cut short his advances. Immediately he sobered and walked away without saying another word.

John then looked away from him, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling, and we continued our conversation.

On this side, strangers can demand some degree of deference, for people here are usually uncertain of just what the next person has in mind, of what he is capable of doing, and of what actions might provoke him to do it. On the barroom side, people often don’t know whom they’re sitting or standing next to. In the right circumstances the next person might show himself to be “the police” or “the baddest cat in Chi.” Or he could be waiting to follow somebody home and rip him off. In the words of the regular clientele, unknown people on this side generally “bear watching.”

One consequence of the suspicion and distrust on this side is that social relationships between visitors and regular customers tend to be guarded. Often people engaged in a conversation at the bar will screen what they say so as not to reveal their telephone numbers or addresses to anyone unless he has been proved trustworthy. Before talking to a stranger,
a person often will try to “read” him carefully to get some sense of what kind of person he is, to know how far he is to be trusted. For this, people pay close attention to a variety of symbols the person displays, using them to interpret and define him so they will know better how to treat him. They listen to the person’s language or, as the men say, his “total conversation” and examine it for clues to his residence, associates, and line of work. They check out the way he is dressed. They watch him interact with others, with an eye and ear to “who they are” and how they treat him. They may even ask someone else, either secretly or publicly, about his trustworthiness. When talking, many tend to check themselves if the wrong people are listening too closely. When people give their names they sometimes use “handles” like Wooly or Bird or Homey, names that permit interaction without allowing others to trace them to their homes or to other settings they feel protective about. Before giving personal trust, they feel a great need to place the next person.

Although most of the visitors respect this definition of affairs, a visitor sometimes ventures into the liquor-store area and begins to hang. He is usually not encouraged to linger. When such a person enters, others usually stop talking or at least quiet down until he leaves. Their eyes usually follow him, reminding him that he is an intruder.

Among the regular clientele he is regarded as an outsider, as one of “Jelly’s customers,” or even as “just a customer.” Sensing that the liquor-store area is either beneath him or apart from him, or that it is too dangerous, the visitor usually finishes his business and returns to the barroom or goes on to another joint. Normally the visitors come to the bar, spend some time, then leave, remaining somewhat unknown to Jelly’s regular clientele.

The men at Jelly’s are equal in the sense that there is a general shared status of peer-group membership. But within the peer group at Jelly’s, the men show themselves to be utterly unequal as they assert their individuality by drawing distinctions among others with whom they share the social space. If anyone in the peer group is able to make group and personal distinctions and successful claim to a status as somebody, according to whatever standard is important to the group at the time, he does so at the pleasure of others in the setting, with their tacit agreement and deference. A person is somebody because others allow him to be—and only when those making such allowances are allowed to be somebody themselves. A principle of social exchange is operating as group members negotiate for status and identity. Through the sociability at Jelly’s, the men manage to rank

“A person is somebody because others allow him to be.”
themselves into at least three rough and somewhat overlapping groupings that they refer to as regulars, hoodlums, and wineheads.

Most group members believe they have a chance to be somebody according to some standard important at Jelly’s. For example, there hoodlums are able to demonstrate their hegemony over the status hierarchy of toughness without being challenged by most others because of the risk involved in “behaving like a hoodlum.” They also attempt to show their ability to get “big dough” without working, exhibitions that rarely require strict proof. Regulars are able to demonstrate that they have money and a “visible means of support” and can thus substantiate their claims to decency. Usually, when the values of decency became status issues, others in the group defer to them. And wineheads are able to just be the group’s wineheads, although few would proudly claim such an identity. But within the group even the disadvantaged winehead status conveys some rights of membership—some expectation of others’ care and concern. They are known, and there are supportive social ties even for them at Jelly’s, thus giving them a stake in the status system.

Perhaps the most important event that alerted me to a conceptual problem and brought me to the conception of the “extended primary group” was a temporary closing of Jelly’s bar and liquor store about six months after I began my fieldwork.

The closing caused some apparent changes in the ways the men conceived of one another and thus attempted to treat one another. Before the closing, for example, wineheads would usually come into the liquor store on business, to buy their wine. After making their purchases, because they did not feel welcome inside, they would generally leave for the alley or the nearby park, where they could drink and be social among their own kind. The group members who spent much time drinking inside the liquor store did not have to remind the wineheads to leave, for they seemed to know where to go on their own. Others who had reputations as being “bad” or as “hoodlums” were also reluctant to hang where they did not “belong.” The “decent” group members generally associated with their own kind, at times drinking and socializing on the barroom side of Jelly’s, but usually a core group of them could be found drinking and hanging in the liquor-store room. Sometimes members of all the groupings of the general peer group could be seen moving back and forth from the street to the liquor store to the bar. While the liquor store and bar were open, these arrangements were regularized and even expected, and members of the extended primary group seemed obligated to follow them.

During the closing, when group members were without their conventional props for expressing their rights to this or that “turf,” they found such obligations and expectations somewhat weakened. Hence they began examining social arrangements and involvements they had been able to take for granted and have confidence in. Finding themselves in a situation that seemed somewhat unclear and unwieldy, people began groping for ways of dealing with one

“Group members remind each other of their obligations about place.”
another. If there was ever a time when group members felt the need to coach and remind each other of their obligations about place, it was then.

Each group member gains a sense of place in this social order, however precarious and open to negotiation it may be, that emerges through social interaction. A person’s place within the group is always situationally sensitive and needs public demonstration from time to time. Indeed, what each man’s conception of place at Jelly’s is is shaped situationally by what liberties other group members allow him and take with him. Others’ conceptions of the man’s place depend in part on what group members have seen him demonstrate in the past, what they “know” him to be capable of, and what all this might mean for their own sense of who they are. In this socially competitive and precarious context, each man’s sense of place is affected by what these others can allow him while still maintaining their presuppositions of “the order” and their places within it. The character of this negotiation affects their collective judgments. The social estimation of the person is communicated to him and others by the way others treat him or attempt to treat him. His reactions to this treatment help define his place within the social order of Jelly’s.

Accordingly, a place in the group requires continued association among the men who make a habit of Jelly’s. It depends in large measure on some long-term and intimate involvement with a group whose members’ social identities depend on one another. Thus status, as achieved in the hierarchies at Jelly’s, is not transferable to just any street corner. Street-corner groups do not typically allow a stranger an automatic sense of place, a comfortable feeling of fitting in. With all its different kinds of people, each one having some sense of his own place in the group, Jelly’s serves as a source of personal identity.

Group members, regardless of rank, feel that others care for them; they belong to the corner group at Jelly’s. This caring is expressed in many different circumstances, most often when a crisis arises in which one person seems to be suffering more than others, and more than is expected of his role in the group. The person’s predicament can arise from extreme poverty, death, injury, illness, or general trouble in one’s life. The extended primary group offers, supportive social ties for its own. For example, when Herman’s wife, Butterroll, went to the hospital for two weeks, many people around Jelly’s talked about her health, expressing their concern for her and also for Herman“Group members feel that others care for them.”
himself. Within the group, it was well known that Herman couldn’t cook and would not do “women’s work.” While Butterroll was in the hospital, he would show up at his regular times on most days, and when he didn’t the others at Jelly’s wondered and worried about him. As time passed Herman began to come unshaven and unkempt, looking more and more like a winehead. Even the wineheads were worried about Herman’s becoming a winehead, or acting like one. More and more, the group members talked about Herman’s condition, describing to others his “winehead-lookin’ self.”

As it became increasingly clear that Herman was not eating properly, group members began coming to his aid. T.J., for instance, began going home with Herman to “fix him somethin’ to eat,” and the wives of some of the regulars began sending him dinners. Group members who had jobs in restaurants began bringing extra “grub” for Herman. Throughout Butterroll’s illness, people were almost as concerned for Herman’s well-being as for Butterroll’s.

The attitude of caring is also expressed when group members die or become ill or otherwise incapacitated. When a regular becomes ill enough to be “off work,” group members associated with any of the crowds—winehead, hoodlum, or regular—will sometimes come to his aid. They contribute out of moral obligation, but also with the hope that their offering will be reciprocated when they are in need. Albert, a regular, became ill and was off work for an extended period. Herman began a collection for him and was able to raise 20 dollars. Because Albert was well liked by the group, almost everyone gave what he could, including wineheads (if they had any money), hoodlums, and regulars.

The people who frequent Jelly’s bar and liquor store have come to create their own local, informal social stratification system. People come to Jelly’s to be sociable, but also to compete for social recognition and regard. For most, Jelly’s is their place to be somebody, for group members are important to one another. Status within this informal system is action-oriented and precarious, based in large measure upon what people think and say and do about other members of the group. A person’s status depends upon what and who he can successfully claim to be, and this is made known through the deference and appreciation others show him. Personal liberties, given and taken, provide a running commentary on the social order. In their quest for social recognition and appreciation, group members try to live up to their valued notions of themselves.

To be sure, there is a certain amount of mobility between the status groupings. Usually this mobility is related to the gain or loss of a job, or to some other major event in the person’s life, and it is either sponsored or hampered by the collective efforts of others. It is not based on a simple decision to allow some person to join the status grouping or to prevent him from joining altogether. Nor is it the person’s own decision alone. Within the extended primary group at Jelly’s people’s actions can be seen as separate but contributing parts of a collective process in the definition and construction of a

“Social order exists because people stay in their places.”
social order and the places within that order. The collective actions of the men sharing the space at Jelly’s are important for the assigning of rank and identity within the group. For example, when Tiger made his attempt for regular status, his success or failure was determined not only by his special awareness, motivations, and new job, but also by the felt interests of others in the setting, particularly those who make claim on regular status themselves. He could move out of the winehead status and associate with regulars only if they allowed him to do so. When Herman’s wife was in the hospital and Herman began going around unkempt, keeping irregular hours, and behaving more like a winehead than a regular, group members worried about keeping him on the right track and out of the winehead group. Herman’s friends were just not ready to allow him to fall into this residual grouping. Throughout my field notes, examples like these indicate that all members of the extended primary group at Jelly’s contribute, through their collective actions, to maintaining the social hierarchy. Social order exists because people stay in their places, and they do so because other people help keep them there.

Through the processes I have described, people defer to one another, are deferred to, ally themselves with certain others, and help prop up identities of valued members of their respective crowds. They gather with their own kind against other kinds of people, or groups of people, who may serve, at least for the moment, as scapegoats— or as examples of what they want to see themselves as distinct from. Group and individual identities are realized during social interaction. Those who can get in on drawing contrasts and distinctions through talk or specific actions can then define themselves as relatively worthwhile by emphatically pointing out that certain others are not. Social order can be seen as a matter of interaction occurring through negotiation and exchange. What people do to and with one another together is of crucial importance, for what they do collectively makes and is the social ranking system.

The word community leads a double life. It makes most people feel good, associated as it is with warmth, friendship, and acceptance. But among academics the word arouses suspicion. Doesn’t community imply the abandonment of ethical universalism and the withdrawal into closed particularistic loyalties? Doesn’t it perhaps lead even to ethnic cleansing?

The word community is a good word and worthy of continued use if it is carefully defined. My fellow authors and I attempted such a definition in Habits of the Heart, but it was often ignored. The primary problem is that the word is frequently used to mean small-scale, face-to-face groups like the family, the congregation, and the small town—what the Germans call Gemeinschaft. There is a long tradition of extolling this kind of community in America. But when that is all that community means, it is basically sentimental and, in the strict sense of the word, nostalgic. And nostalgia, as Christopher Lasch wrote, is merely a psychological placebo that allows one to accept regretfully but uncritically whatever is currently being served up in the name of progress. It inhibits, rather than serves, serious social criticism.

Thus if the term community is to be useful, it must mean something more. Those philosophical liberals who tend to reject the term community altogether see society as based on a social contract establishing procedures of fairness, but otherwise leaving individuals free to serve their own interests. They argue that under modern conditions, if we think of community as based on shared values and shared goals,
community can exist only in small groups and is not possible or desirable in large-scale societies or institutions.

A deeper analysis, however, reveals that it is possible to see this supposed contrast of contract versus community as a continuum, or even as a necessary complementarity, rather than as an either/or proposition. Surely procedural norms of fairness are necessary in large-scale social institutions; but any group of any size, if it has a significant breadth of involvement and lasts a significant length of time, must have some shared values and goals. Consequently societies and institutions can never be based solely on contract, striving to maximize the opportunities of individuals. They must also, to some extent, be communities with shared values and goals.

But this reformulation leads to a further problem. Those who think of community as a form of Gemeinschaft, as well as their liberal critics, tend to think consensus about values and goals must be complete or nearly complete. Is such complete consensus realistic, or even desirable, in modern societies?

The answer, of course, is no. Yet this lack of unanimity need not create problems for supporters of community. While community-shared values and goals do imply something more than procedural agreement—they do imply some agreements about substance—they do not require anything like total or unarguable agreement. A good community is one in which there is argument, even conflict, about the meaning of the shared values and goals, and certainly about how they will be actualized in everyday life. Community is not about silent consensus; it is a form of intelligent, reflective life, in which there is indeed consensus, but when the consensus can be challenged and changed—often gradually, sometimes radically—over time.

Thus we are led to the question of what makes any kind of group a community and not just a contractual association. The answer lies in a shared concern with the following question: “What will make this group a good group?” Any institution, such as a university, a city, or a society, insofar as it is or seeks to be a community, needs to ask, what is a good university, city, society, and so forth? So far as it reaches agreement about the good it is supposed to realize (and that will always be contested and open to further debate), it becomes a community with some common values and some common goals. (“Goals”...
are particularly important, as the effort to define a good community also entails the goal of trying to create a good one—or, more modestly and realistically, a better one than the current one.)

Even given the claim that community does not require complete consensus, some people view with skepticism any effort to reach some common agreement about the good. Such a view is rooted in our culture’s adherence to “ontological individualism”—the belief that the truth of our condition is not in our society or in our relation to others, but in our isolated and inviolable selves. It is this belief that tempts us to imagine that it is opportunity that will solve all our problems—if we could just provide individuals the opportunity to realize themselves, then everything else would take care of itself. If we focus on individual opportunity then we don’t need to worry about substantive agreement or the common good, much less force any such notion on others. Each individual can concentrate on whatever good he or she chooses to pursue.

In seeking to solve our problems through individual opportunity we have come up with two master strategies. We will provide opportunity through the market or through the state. The great ideological wars of our current politics focus on whether the most effective provider of opportunity is the market or the state. On this issue we imagine a radical polarity between conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat. What we often do not see is that this is a very tame polarity, because the opponents agree so deeply on most of the terms of the problem. Both solutions are individualistic. Whatever their opponents say, those who support a strong government seldom believe in government as such. They simply see it as the most effective provider of those opportunities that will allow individuals to have a fair chance at making something of themselves. Those who believe in the market think free competition is the best context for individual self-realization. Both positions are essentially technocratic. They do not imply much about substantive values, other than freedom and opportunity. They would solve our problems through economic or political mechanisms, not moral solidarity.

And yet the world of these ideological opponents, composed as it is of autonomous individuals, markets, and states, is not the world that anyone lives in—not even the free enterprise or welfare liberal ideologists. This ideological world is a world without families.

“Shared values and goals do not require total or unarguable agreement.”
It is also a world without neighborhoods, ethnic communities, churches, cities and towns, even nations (as opposed to states). It is, to use the terminology of the German sociologist-philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a world of individuals and systems (economic and administrative), but not a lifeworld. The lifeworld missing in these conservative and liberal ideologies is the place at which we communicate with others, deliberate, come to agreements about standards and norms, pursue in common an effort to create a valuable form of life—in short, the lifeworld is the world of community.

I want to sketch a framework that escapes the ideological blinders of current American politics and highlights what is missing in much of our debate. As opposed to free market conservatism and welfare state liberalism, I want to describe another approach to our common problems, which I will call—borrowing from Jonathan Boswell in Community and the Economy: The Theory of Public Co-Operation—democratic communitarianism.

Democratic communitarianism does not pit itself against the two reigning ideologies as a third way. It accepts the value and inevitability of both the market and the state, but it insists that the function of the market and the state is to serve us, not to dominate us. Democratic communitarianism seeks to provide a humane context within which to think about the market and the state. Its first principle is the one already enunciated in what I have said about community: it seeks to define and further the good, which is the community’s purpose. I want to offer four values to which democratic communitarianism is committed and which give its notion of the good somewhat more specificity:

1. Democratic communitarianism is based on the value of the sacredness of the individual, which is common to most of the great religions and philosophies of the world. (It is expressed in biblical religion through the idea that we are created in the image and likeness of God.) Anything that would oppress individuals, or operate to stunt individual development, would be contrary to

“This ideological world is a world without families, neighborhoods, ethnic communities, churches, cities, and towns.”

the principles of democratic communitarianism. However, unlike its ideologic rivals, democratic communitarianism does not think of individuals as existing in a vacuum or as existing in a world composed only of
markets and states. Rather, it believes that individuals are realized only in and through communities, and that strong, healthy, morally vigorous communities are the prerequisite for strong, healthy, morally vigorous individuals.

“Individuals are realized only in and through communities.”

2. Democratic communitarianism, therefore, affirms the central value of solidarity. Solidarity points to the fact that we become who we are through our relationships—that reciprocity, loyalty, and shared commitment to the good are defining features of a fully human life.

3. Democratic communitarianism believes in what Boswell has called “complementary association.” By this he means a commitment to “varied social groupings: the family, the local community, the cultural or religious group, the economic enterprise, the trade union or profession, the nation-state.” Through this principle it is clear that community does not mean small-scale, all-inclusive, total groups. In our kind of society an individual will belong to many communities and ultimately, the world itself can be seen as a community. Democratic communitarianism views such a multiplicity of belonging as a positive good, as potentially and in principle complementary.

4. Finally, democratic communitarianism is committed to the idea of participation as both a right and a duty. Communities become positive goods only when they provide the opportunity and support to participate in them. A corollary of this principle is the principle of subsidiarity, derived from Catholic social teaching.

This idea asserts that the groups closest to a problem should attend to it, receiving support from higher-level groups only if necessary. To be clear, democratic communitarianism does not adhere to Patrick Buchanan’s interpretation of subsidiarity, which projects a society virtually without a state. A more legitimate understanding of subsidiarity realizes the inevitability and necessity of the state. It has the responsibility of nurturing lower-level associations wherever they are weak, as they normally are among the poor and the marginalized. Applying this perspective to current events, at a moment when powerful political forces in the United States are attempting to dismantle a weak welfare state, democratic communitarians will defend vigorous and responsible state action.

Nothing in this argument is meant to imply that face-to-face community is not a good
thing. It is, and in our society it needs to be strengthened. But the argument for democratic community—rooted in the search for the common good—applies to groups of any size, and ultimately to the world as a community. It is a political argument grounded on the belief that a politics based on the summing of individual preferences is inadequate and misleading. Democratic communitarianism presumes that morality and politics cannot be separated and that moral argument, painful and difficult though it sometimes is, is fundamental to a defensible stance in today’s world.

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Among the Asante, you will be glad to hear, incest between brothers and sisters and parents and children is shunned as akyiwadee. You can agree with an Asante that it’s wrong, even if you don’t accept his explanation of why. If my interest is in discouraging theft, I needn’t worry that one person might refrain from theft because she believes in the Golden Rule; another because of her conception of personal integrity; a third because she thinks God frowns on it. I’ve said that value language helps shape common responses of thought, action, and feeling. But when the issue is what to do, differences in what we think and feel can fall away. We know from our own family lives that conversation doesn’t start with agreement on principles. Who but someone in the grip of a terrible theory would want to insist on an agreement on principles before discussing which movie to go to, what to have for dinner, when to go to bed?

Indeed, our political coexistence, as subjects or citizens, depends on being able to agree about practices while disagreeing about their justification. For many long years, in medieval Spain under the Moors and later in the Ottoman Near East, Jews and Christians of various denominations lived under Muslim rule. This modis vivendi was possible only because the various communities did not have to agree on a set of universal values. In 17th-century Holland, starting roughly in the time of Rembrandt, the Sephardic Jewish community began to be increasingly well integrated into Dutch society, and there was a great deal of intellectual as well as social exchange between Christian and Jewish
communities. Christian toleration of Jews did not depend on express agreement on fundamental values. Indeed, these historical examples of religious toleration—you might even call them early experiments in multiculturalism—should remind us of the most obvious fact about our own society.

Americans share a willingness to be governed by the system set out in the U.S. Constitution. But that does not require anyone to agree to any particular claims or values. The Bill of Rights tells us, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Yet we don’t need to agree on what values underlie our acceptance of the First Amendment’s treatment of religion. Is it religious toleration as an end in itself? Or is it a Protestant commitment to the sovereignty of the individual conscience? Is it prudence, which recognizes that trying to force religious conformity on people only leads to civil discord? Or is it skepticism that any religion has it right? Is it to protect the government from religion? Or religion from the government? Or is it some combination of these, or other, aims?

Cass Sunstein, the American legal scholar, has written eloquently that our understanding of constitutional law is a set of what he calls “incompletely theorized agreements.” People mostly agree that it would be wrong for Congress to pass laws prohibiting the building of mosques, for example, without agreeing exactly as to why. Many of us would, no doubt, mention the First Amendment (even though we don’t agree about what values it embodies). But others would ground their judgment not in any particular law but in a conception, say, of democracy or in the equal citizenship of Muslims, neither of which is explicitly mentioned in the Constitution. There is no agreed-upon answer—and the point is there doesn’t need to be. We can live together without agreeing on what the values are that make it good to live together; we can agree about what to do in most cases, without agreeing about why it is right.

I don’t want to overstate the claim. No doubt there are widely shared values that help Americans live together in amity. But they certainly don’t live together successfully because they have a shared theory of value or a shared story as to how to bring “their” values to bear in each case. They each have a pattern of life that they are used to; and neighbors who are, by and large, used to them. So long as this settled pattern is not seriously disrupted, they do not worry overmuch about whether their fellow citizens agree with them or their theories about how to live. Americans tend to have, in sum, a broadly liberal reaction when they do hear about their fellow citizens doing something that they would not do themselves: they mostly think it is not their business and not the government’s business.

“We can live together without agreeing on what the values are.”
either. And, as a general rule, their shared “Americanness” matters to them, although many of their fellow Americans are remarkably unlike themselves. It’s just that what they do share can be less substantial than we’re inclined to suppose.

It’s not surprising, then, that what makes conversation across boundaries worth-while isn’t that we’re likely to come to a reasoned agreement about values. I don’t say that we can’t change minds, but the reasons we exchange in our conversations will seldom do much to persuade others who do not share our fundamental evaluative judgments already. (Remember: the same goes, mutatis mutandis, for factual judgments.)

When we offer judgments, after all, it’s rarely because we have applied well-thought-out principles to a set of facts and deduced an answer. Our efforts to justify what we have done—or what we plan to do—are typically made up after the event, rationalizations of what we have decided intuitively. And a good deal of what we intuitively take to be right, we take to be right just because it is what we are used to. If you live in a society where children are spanked, you will probably spank your children. You will believe that it is a good way to teach them right from wrong and that, despite the temporary suffering caused by a beating, they will end up better off for it. You will point to the wayward child and say, sotto voce, that his parents do not know how to discipline him; you will mean that they do not beat him enough. You will also, no doubt, recognize that there are people who beat their children too hard or too often. So you will recognize that beating a child can sometimes be cruel.

So, too, with other social trends. Just a couple of generations ago, in most of the industrialized world, most people thought that middle-class women would ideally be housewives and mothers. If they had time on their hands, they could engage in charitable work or entertain one another; a few of them might engage in the arts, writing novels, painting, performing music, theater, and dance. But there was little place for them in the “learned professions”—as lawyers or doctors, priests or rabbis; and if they were to be academics, they would only teach young women and probably remain unmarried. They were not likely to make their way in politics, except perhaps at the local level. And they were not made welcome in science. How much of the shift away from these assumptions is the result of arguments? Isn’t a significant part of it just the consequence of our getting used to new ways of doing things? The arguments that kept the old pattern in place were not—to put it mildly—terribly good. If the reasons for the old sexist way of doing things had been the problem, the women’s movement could have been done within a couple of weeks. There are still people, I know, who think that the ideal life for any woman is making and managing a home. There are more who think that it is an honorable option. Still, the vast majority of Westerners would be appalled at the idea of trying to force women back into

“Our efforts to justify what we have done are typically made up after the event.”
these roles. Arguments mattered for the women who made the women’s movement and the men who responded to them. This I do not mean to deny. But their greatest achievement has been to change our habits. In the 1950s, if a college-educated woman wanted to go to law or business school, the natural response was “Why?” Now the natural response is “Why not?”

Or consider another example: in much of Europe and North America, in places where a generation ago homosexuals were social outcasts and homosexual acts were illegal, lesbian and gay couples are increasingly being recognized by their families, by society, and by the law. This is true despite the continued opposition of major religious groups and a significant and persisting undercurrent of social disapproval. Both sides make arguments, some good, most bad, if you apply a philosophical standard of reasoning. But if you ask the social scientists what has produced this change, they will rightly not start with a story about reasons. They will give you a historical account that concludes with a sort of perspectival shift. The increasing presence of “openly gay” people in social life and in the media has changed our habits. Over the last 30 or so years, instead of thinking about the private activity of gay sex, many Americans started thinking about the public category of gay people. Even those who continue to think of the sex with disgust now find it harder to deny these people their respect and concern (and some of them have learned, as we all did with our own parents, that it’s better not to think too much about other people’s sex lives anyway).

Now, I don’t deny that all the time, at every stage, people were talking, giving each other reasons to do things: accept their children, stop treating homosexuality as a medical disorder, disagree with their churches, come out. Still the short version of the story is basically this: people got used to lesbians and gay people. I am urging that we should learn about people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that

“Each side recognizes the very values the other insists upon.”

will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another. If that is the aim, then the fact that we have all these opportunities for disagreement about values need not put us off. Understanding one another may be hard; it can certainly be interesting. But it doesn’t require that we come to agreement.
I’ve said we can live in harmony without agreeing on underlying values (except perhaps, the cosmopolitan value of living together). It works the other way, too: we can find ourselves in conflict when we do agree on values. Warring parties are seldom at odds because they have clashing conceptions of “the good.” On the contrary, conflict arises most often when two peoples have identified the same thing as good. The fact that both Palestinians and Israelis—in particular, that both observant Muslims and observant Jews—have a special relation to Jerusalem, to the Temple Mount, has been a reliable source of trouble. The problem isn’t that they disagree about the importance of Jerusalem: the problem is exactly that they both care for it deeply and, in part, for the same reasons. Muhammad, in the first years of Islam, urged his followers to turn towards Jerusalem in prayer because he had learned the story of Jerusalem from the Jews among whom he lived in Mecca. Nor is it an accident that the West’s fiercest adversaries among other societies tend to come from among the most Westernized of the group. Mon semblable mon frère? Only if the frère you have in mind is Cain. We all know now that the foot soldiers of Al Qaeda who committed the mass murders at the Twin Towers and the Pentagon were not Bedouins from the desert; not unlettered fellabin.

Indeed, there’s a wider pattern here. Who in Ghana excoriated the British and built the movement for independence? Not the farmers and peasants. Not the chiefs. It was the Western-educated bourgeoisie. And when in the 1950s Kwame Nkrumah—who went to college in Pennsylvania and lived in London—created a nationalist mass movement, at its core were soldiers who had returned from fighting a war in the British army, urban market women who traded Dutch prints, trade unionists who worked in industries created by colonialism, and the so-called “veranda boys,” who had been to colonial secondary schools, learned English, studied history and geography in textbooks written in England. Who led the resistance to the British Raj? An Indian-born South African lawyer, trained in the British courts, whose name was Gandhi; an Indian named Nehru who wore Savile Row suits and sent his daughter to an English boarding school; and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, who joined Lincoln’s Inn in London and became a barrister at the age of 19.

In Shakespeare’s Tempest, Caliban, the original inhabitant of an island commandeered by Prospero, roars at his domineering colonizer, “You taught me language and my profit on’t is, I know how to curse.” It is no surprise that Prospero’s “abhorred slave” has been a figure of colonial resistance for literary nationalists all around the world. And in borrowing from Caliban, they have also borrowed from Shakespeare. Prospero has told Caliban:

When thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known.
Of course, one of the effects of colonialism was not only to give many of the natives a European language, but also to help shape their purposes. The independence movements of the post-1945 world, which led to the end of Europe's African and Asian empires, were driven by the rhetoric that had guided the Allies' own struggle against Germany and Japan: democracy, freedom, equality. This wasn't a conflict between values. It was a conflict of interests couched in terms of the same values.

The point applies as much within the West as elsewhere. Americans disagree about abortion, many vehemently. They couch this conflict in a language of conflicting values: they are pro-life or pro-choice. But this is a dispute that makes sense only because each side recognizes the very values the other insists upon. The disagreement is about their significance. Both sides respect something like the sanctity of human life. They disagree about such things as why human life is so precious and where it begins. Whatever you want to call those disagreements, it’s just a mistake to think that either side doesn’t recognize the value at stake here. And the same is true about choice: Americans are not divided about whether it’s important to allow people, women and men, to make the major medical choices about their own bodies. They are divided about such questions as whether an abortion involves two people—both fetus and mother—or three people, adding in the father, or only one. Furthermore, no sane person on either side thinks that saving human lives or allowing people medical autonomy is the only thing that matters.

Some people will point to disputes about homosexuality and say that there, at least, there really is a conflict between people who do and people who don’t regard homosexuality as a perversion. Isn’t that a conflict of values? Well, no. Most Americans, on both sides, have the concept of perversion: of sexual acts that are wrong because their objects are inappropriate objects of sexual desire. But not everyone thinks that the fact that an act involves two women or two men makes it perverted. Not everyone who thinks these acts are perverse thinks they should be illegal. Not everyone who thinks they should be illegal thinks that gay and lesbian people should be ostracized. What is at stake, once more, is a battle about the meaning of perversion, about its status as a value, and about how to apply it. It is a reflection of the essentially contestable character of perversion as a term of value. When one turns from the issue of criminalization of gay sex—which is, at least for the moment, unconstitutional in the United States—to the question of gay marriage, all sides of the debate take seriously issues of sexual autonomy, the value of the intimate lives of couples, the meaning of family, and by way of discussion.

“We have shared horizons of meaning.”
of perversion, the proper uses of sex.

What makes these conflicts so intense is that they are battles over the meaning of the same values, not that they oppose one value, held exclusively by one side, with another, held exclusively by their antagonists. It is, in part, because we have shared horizons of meaning, because these are debates between people who share so many other values and so much else in the way of belief and of habit, that they are as sharp and as painful as they are.

But the disputes about abortion and gay marriage divide Americans bitterly most of all because they share a society and a government. They are neighbors and fellow citizens. And it is laws governing all of them that are in dispute. What’s at stake are their bodies or those of their mothers, their aunts, their sisters, their daughters, their wives, and their friends; those dead fetuses could have been their children or their children’s friends.

We should remember this when we think about international human rights treaties. Treaties are law, even when they are weaker than national law. When we seek to embody our concern for strangers in human rights law and when we urge our government to enforce it, we are seeking to change the world of law in every nation on the planet. We have outlawed slavery not just domestically but in international law. And in so doing we have committed ourselves, at a minimum, to the desirability of its eradication everywhere. This is no longer controversial in the capitals of the world. No one defends enslavement. But international treaties define slavery in ways that arguably include debt bondage; and debt bondage is a significant economic institution in parts of South Asia. I hold no brief for debt bondage.

Still, we shouldn’t be surprised if people whose income and whose style of life depend upon it are angry. Given that we have neighbors—even if only a few—who think that the fact that abortion is permitted in the United States turns the killing of the doctors who perform them into an act of heroism, we should not be surprised that there are strangers—even if only a few—whose anger turns them to violence against us.

I do not fully understand the popularity among Islamist movements in Egypt, Algeria, Iran, and Pakistan of high-octane anti-Western rhetoric. But I do know one of its roots. It is, to use suitably old-fashioned language, “the woman question.” There are Muslims, many of them young men, who feel that forces from outside their society—forces that they might think of as Western or, in a different movement, American—are pressuring them to reshape relations between men and women. Part of that pressure, they feel, comes from our media. Our films and our television programs are crammed with indescribable indecency. Our fashion magazines show women without modesty, women whose presence on many streets in the Muslim world would be a provocation, they think, presenting an almost irresistible temptation to men. Those magazines influence publications in their own countries, pulling them inevitably in the same direction. We permit women to swim almost naked with

“History does show that a society can radically change its attitudes.”
strange men, which is our business; but it is hard to keep the news of these acts of immodesty from Muslim women and children or to protect Muslim men from the temptations they inevitably create. As the Internet spreads, it will get even harder, and their children, especially their girls, will be tempted to ask for these freedoms too. Worse, they say, we are now trying to force our conception of how women and men should behave upon them. We speak of women’s rights. We make treaties enshrining these rights. And then we want their governments to enforce them.

Like many people in every nation, I support those treaties, of course; I believe that women, like men, should have the vote, should be entitled to work outside their homes, should be protected from the physical abuse of men, including their fathers, brothers, and husbands. But I also know that the changes that these freedoms would bring will change the balance of power between men and women in everyday life. How do I know this? Because I have lived most of my adult life in the West as it has gone through the latter phases of just such a transition, and I know that the process is not yet complete.

The recent history of America does show that a society can radically change its attitudes —and more importantly, perhaps, its habits—about these issues over a single generation. But it also suggests that some people will stay with the old attitudes, and the whole process will take time. The relations between men and women are not abstractions: they are part of the intimate texture of our everyday lives. We have strong feelings about them, and we have inherited many received ideas. Above all, we have deep habits about gender. A man and a woman go out on a date. Our habit is that, even if the woman offers, the man pays. A man and a woman approach an elevator door. The man steps back. A man and a woman kiss in a movie theater. No one takes a second look. Two men walk hand in hand in the high street. People are embarrassed. They hope their children don’t see. They don’t know how to explain it to them.

Most Americans are against gay marriage, conflicted about abortion, and amazed (and appalled) that Saudi women can’t get a driver’s license. But my guess is that they’re not as opposed to gay marriage as they were 20 years ago. Indeed, 20 years ago, most Americans would probably just have thought the whole idea ridiculous. On the other hand, those Americans who are in favor of recognizing gay
marriages probably don’t have a simple set of reasons why. It just seems right to them, probably, in the way that it just seems wrong to those who disagree. (And probably they’re thinking not about couples in the abstract but about Jim and John or Jean and Jane.) The younger they are, the more likely it is that they think that gay marriage is fine. And if they don’t, it will often be because they have had religious objections reinforced regularly through life in church, mosque, or temple.

I am a philosopher. I believe in reason. But I have learned in a life of university teaching and research that even the cleverest people are not easily shifted by reason alone—and that can be true even in the most cerebral of realms. One of the great savants of the postwar era, John von Neumann, liked to say, mischievously, that, “in mathematics you don’t understand things, you just get used to them.” In the larger world, outside the academy, people don’t always even care whether they seem reasonable. Conversation, as I’ve said, is hardly guaranteed to lead to agreement about what to think and feel. Yet we go wrong if we think the point of conversation is to persuade, and imagine it proceeding as a debate, in which points are scored for the Proposition and the Opposition. Often enough, as Faust said, in the beginning is the deed: practices and not principles are what enable us to live together in peace. Conversations across boundaries of identity—whether national, religious, or something else—begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So I’m using the word conversation not only for literal talk but as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others. And I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values, it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another.

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To look at the aftermath of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina is to know an important reality about public life and politics these days. No matter how much people may hope for change in America, a single event alone cannot lead us to marshal either the resources or the will to reinvigorate a new sense of community among people or to reengage us more fully. It is not that I believe our responses to such challenges have not been awe inspiring; they have often brought out the best in us. Nor do I believe the challenges that remain in public life and politics are insurmountable; there is abundant evidence to suggest that change is possible. My concern is that the foundation needed for widespread change does not yet exist in the nation. We lack the proper conditions, capacity, and collective will to bring about the change we want.

As I write this essay, I am traveling across the country, for a 6th time in the last 15 years —this latest journey began some 18 months ago and has taken me to more than 30 communities—to talk in-depth with Americans about the condition of public life and politics. The nation’s public life and politics is undergoing radical change. The very nature of our relationships—to one another as individuals; to public, private, and civic groups and institutions; to our communities and the larger society; and to our very notion of what is “public” and what is “private”—have all been shaken loose and are up for renegotiation.

I acknowledge that some recent changes have introduced truly noteworthy opportunities. Indeed there are many examples of promising
opportunities. But the challenges cannot be met simply through the introduction of a new technology, through the enactment of a piece of legislation, through some other single intervention or event, or even through the selection of a new candidate for higher office. The challenges we face are too deep and widespread.

Today, the question for us is, how we can understand the important change that is occurring and help accelerate it in the right direction.

The Pittsburgh neighborhood in Atlanta—one of the poorest areas in the city—abuts Turner Field, where the major league baseball team, the Atlanta Braves, plays. From the direction of downtown, the Olympic Circles of the 1996 Atlanta Games stretch over a gleaming, brightly lit bridge that feeds people right to the stadium gates. But the bright lights go dark the moment you take a step beyond the stadium and enter Pittsburgh.

On a recent book tour, I spoke to a group of people who live in the neighborhood just beyond those bright lights. In the course of the event, I met Miss Trina, who worked for the Salvation Army and offered to show me and two of my colleagues around the Pittsburgh neighborhood, where much of what one sees are abandoned homes, trash-strewn lots, wrecked cars, and young men on street corners with no place to go. Amid this despair were signs of rebuilding, too many to note in this short piece. But I do want to tell you that Miss Trina was about to start a new job the following week, building on her five-year career with the Salvation Army to lead the effort to construct a new community center in the neighborhood. The effort required people from all walks of life to come together to figure out exactly how to build a center that could be of the community.

In places far and wide I found comparable pockets of change taking root and I came away from this round of conversations with the distinct impression that these pockets are growing in numbers and significance, in one community after another—from Las Vegas to Hartsville, from Portland to Tampa, Madison to Newark. The most vital pockets are not simply nodes of activity. The most promising always seem to do two things at once: they address a pressing public issue, such as schools or crime or family support, and they build community by strengthening local norms, relationships, networks, organizations, and leaders. I call this the “Sweet Spot of Public Life.” It is this two-pronged impact, which gives such pockets the leverage actually to change a community.

Take, for instance, the pockets of change in Youngstown, Ohio, a community that has

“They are addressing public challenges and building community at the same time.”
endured years of decline and stagnation (some of it documented in *Waiting for the Future*, written when I first went to Youngstown, in 1997). Now, different groups of people, many of whom started their efforts independently of one another, are creating new small high schools, redeveloping a dilapidated neighborhood area downtown, tearing down walls between Youngstown State University and the community, and reconfiguring the actual shape and size of the community’s physical dimensions. The actions emerging from these pockets have helped change the tone of public discourse; they have led to the creation of new networks and cadres of leaders; they have produced more productive norms and changed the way public work is being done. In other words, they are addressing core public challenges and building community at the same time. They have found the sweet spot.

It is important to recognize that such efforts almost always start out by operating in isolation in a community, much like an island or oasis surrounded by a sea of business-as-usual. Even when there is more than one pocket within the same community, you will find each operating as a small isolated area. They are, after all, *pockets of change*, and as such can easily be dismissed as having little significance. But I see them differently. If carefully cultivated, they can become seedbeds for what is possible. Usually small in comparison to the overall challenges they attempt to address, such endeavors represent the emergence of change nonetheless. As the effects from the individual pockets ripple out, over time they begin to touch; and when they do, they produce newly shared norms and values and relationships and leaders, thus helping to shape new conditions in a community.

**T**he emergence of many pockets of change, vigorous and becoming more pervasive is the good news. But this emergence of change needs to be nurtured, and it puts before us a demanding two-part challenge.

The first part is that we must actively work to spread and eventually connect pockets of change so they become a broader and deeper force that helps to alter the prevailing direction of public life and politics, whether in a single neighborhood, a community, or across the land. At the same time we must exercise caution in the pursuit of this task, for at this juncture critical mistakes can be made. In our efforts to accelerate progress, we must not choke it off, which we can do by overly controlling what happens, or by coordinating too many activities and thus killing off creativity and innovation, or by skipping important stages of development out of impatience or hubris. The challenge is first and foremost about how we think about change and how it unfolds.

The second part of the challenge is that we must find ways to connect the meaning of these change efforts to the broader aspirations within people for public life and politics. Often, despite their aspirations, people do not connect
their relatively small-scale civic work in these pockets to the work of larger democratic institutions; they mostly speak of the two as entirely separate endeavors. And they do not associate their actions with broader systemic changes that might help to address deeper concerns. It is as if people literally shift gears when they move from talking about their pockets of change to focusing on politics and public life—as if politics and public life operated in a wholly different universe, out of reach of their good works, one that they cannot touch or influence or shape.

If you listen to the politicians and pundits and those who earn their livelihood making predictions about public life and politics, you may think that change is not possible: we hear from various sources in society that we are a divided, even polarized, nation—red states vs. blue states, church-goers vs. non-church-goers, suburban vs. urban vs. rural voters. For individuals who actively promote the notion of division, the goal is “victory.” They want their side to prevail—oftentimes at any cost.

The rallying cry of people who are working daily to bridge the so-called divide can sound at times akin to Rodney King’s refrain, “Can’t we all get along?” But their well-intentioned efforts are sometimes undermined by empty slogans, wishful thinking, or naïve plans. (Or they are tarnished by politicians merely seeking political gain.) At the close of the 2004 presidential election season, both President G.W. Bush and U.S. Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential nominee, embraced the basic thrust of this approach (if only for a fleeting moment) when they called on Americans to put aside their differences and “unite.” But those sentiments rang hollow after both candidates engaged in a campaign rooted in a narrative of division and based on divisive tactics. (Similar sentiments about coming together were echoed again after the recent 2006 mid-term elections; not much progress has happened on this front either.)

More important for us to consider is that despite the posturing and various good-will efforts, it is neither victory nor unity that people really seek at all. Instead they yearn to reengage around core sets of values—I call them citizen-based values—which have been emerging with unmistakable consistency over recent years. If people had their way, these values would guide our individual and collective engagement, helping to shape our conduct as we search for answers in public life and politics.

• Greater integrity and honesty in public life and politics: people believe leaders, news
media, and citizens alike are too willing to cut corners and shade the truth;

- More discipline in staying true to a sense of public purpose, to focus on what is important—focusing, for example, on kids when discussing education, not the politics of public school reform;

- A modicum of trust and respect in how we deal with each other, rooted in the recognition that we are in relationship with one another, not simply living alone in isolated close-knit circles of family, friends, and like-minded groups.

These citizen-based values demand an acknowledgement of others even when sharp disagreements exist, and an understanding of our interdependence, fully knowing we will not always befriend one another.

Concern about values obviously did not begin sometime in the last year or two. A values debate has been taking place in the nation for some time and has focused on hot-button notions, such as “family values” and “patriotism” and “welfare reform,” which were meant to pit people against each other. Yet beneath the surface of that highly divisive and acrimonious debate loomed another discussion, more important and meaningful to people, about values like truth and forthrightness, loyalty and trust, social fairness and personal responsibility, the meaning of community and how to balance it with individual independence.

These are the citizen-based values I believe people now seek to embrace.

In one community after the next, conversation turns to the centrality of values in public life and politics and the need to put a stake in the ground on their importance. “Everything is coming down to values,” one person said to me. But we should have no illusions about this being easy. People’s desire to forge a common commitment on important values is wholly different from manipulative efforts directed by a relative few to drive debates to the extremes. And people believe they have forfeited their space in the public arena to those who occupy the extremes, and in doing so have separated their own essential values from their public life. As one woman noted to me, “We have lost sight of our core values and how to connect them to the way we live.” Another person remarked that when it comes to values, “We’re so afraid to stand for anything, so we dummy down everything.”

“People yearn to reengage around core sets of values.”
Virtually every place I go, people ask me: “How can we find the leaders we all seek?” Audience members always nod their heads in approval when this question comes up; they inevitably stretch their bodies forward to hear the ensuing discussion. Their disgust with the quality of leadership in the country and in their communities is palpable and deep—and unmistakable.

At a time when presidential politics is heating up once more, there is a much quieter and potentially more important leadership revolution taking place across the land. In fact, I have come to the conclusion that it is leadership from within our communities that is most needed and vital to our future—leadership that will come from individuals of all walks of life, including small neighborhood groups, foundations, organizations like United Way, public broadcasting, and civic organizations, as well as from folks who simply join together to solve a problem.

Still, for now, I will focus my comments on elected officials because, while such officials are treated with near to universal and unrelenting contempt from people, there is, I believe, a new breed of elected leader emerging, striking a fundamentally different covenant with people in their communities. The new breed of leaders I have in mind tends often to be relatively young, 30-something. My growing list of such leaders includes the new mayor of Newark, New Jersey, Cory Booker; the mayor of Binghamton, New York, Matt Ryan; the two-term congressman from Youngstown, Ohio, Tim Ryan (recently appointed to a key leadership position by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi); Harold Ford Jr., a six-term congressman from Tennessee, who recently lost his U.S. senate bid but from whom we will surely hear again; the new mayor in the nation’s capital, Adrian Fenty; and Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York City.

We may argue over the particular positions, politics, or policies of these individuals, but note that these and like-minded public officials represent an out-of-the-ordinary trajectory in politics and public life. Take Jay Williams, the new mayor of Youngstown, who is the city’s first Independent to be elected since 1922 and the first African American ever. While I was in Youngstown, people talked about Williams and Congressman Tim Ryan in terms I seldom hear when people talk about their leaders. Here is what three different people had to say about Williams and Ryan:

They’re not politicians. They are like us. They’ll roll up their sleeves. They’ll talk directly from the heart. It’s not political speak.

What we see in Jay and Tim are young guys who are genuinely concerned about the areas, who are seen as honest and hard working and “eyeball to eyeball.” We haven’t had that. Hopefully, they will bring more people into the system.

That’s what we need more of.

Such statements are different from those I heard during my earlier travels across the nation, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when people talked about leaders they trusted. The rhetoric identified good leaders as “outsiders,”

“Leadership from within our communities is vital to our future.”
people seeking a “hostile takeover” of government, people who disparaged the role of government. In contrast, today the new leaders have highly pragmatic approaches to policy, seek ways to make public life and politics work rather than disparage it, and vigilantly look for opportunities to engage people in the ongoing process of governing and improving their lives, avoiding hyperbolic and heated rhetoric. I am not suggesting that this new breed of leader is filling the leadership deficit that now exists in the nation; the vacuum of trust will take years to fill and much of it will be filled, I believe, by nonelected leaders. But while simply talking about the leadership gap tends to paralyze people, identifying and talking about these emerging leaders gives people hope. Now, we must find ways to stand beside and support these new leaders.

We must also answer the following question. “One issue we struggle with is how to build community. How do we do that?” This I heard in Toledo, Ohio, but it was repeated from community to community along the book tour. People often get stuck when talking about the poor quality of leadership in their communities and in the nation—not simply because of a lack of leadership, but because they cannot see or imagine pathways in which they themselves could step forward to engage and take effective action on a broader scale. Put another way, they do not see how they can build their community.

Time and again, I have heard people struggle with situations in which they felt an urgent need to take action on some challenge but were unable to decide on a way forward that made sense to them. The feeling of being stuck was expressed in the context of a whole host of specific issues—from reinvigorating a neighborhood to addressing race relations and racism, from improving public schools to supporting children and families. Yet, no matter the specific challenge, the feeling of “stuckness” was consistent from place to place.

The reasons for being stuck vary. In some instances, it becomes clear that communities lack positive norms to support and sustain civic work over time. They bump up against what I have come to call “anti-norms”—which can include acrimony and divisiveness, finger pointing and blame placing, turf battles, and people taking credit for deeds they did not do. We all talk about such negative norms and their negative effects on communities; but these concerns are hard to address, and our conversations can end in a cloud of despair. And when that happens, people typically seek to create a list of “To Do” items—the longer the better!—to occupy attention and take our eye off the need

“Communities lack positive norms to support and sustain civic work.”
to address negative norms. My own research and experience in communities suggest that anti-norms are a contagion that spreads and wears people down; to combat them in ways that last over time is a challenge on which my own work has increasingly focused.

At other times people may be stuck because they are often at a loss about where to start an engagement process, how to make it work, who needs to be involved, and how to pivot from engagement into some form of individual and collective action. Here, again, there may be lots of activity but little movement forward. What’s more, there is a hidden stumbling block to engagement—hidden because, in my experience, it seldom gets adequately surfaced and discussed: how to conceptualize the essence of why anyone should even undertake engagement in the first place, other than to gain the approval that comes from saying it is being done! Engagement raises all sorts of issues for people about control—or more precisely, about sharing control. Do they really want to know what people in their community truly think about an issue? Are they willing to wrestle with the implications of the public knowledge that emerges? Do they have the systems in place within organizations to inform their own discussion, programs, and initiatives with the knowledge they gain?

Organizations can be stuck too. In public settings most leaders of organizations can appear eager to embrace new initiatives in the civic arena. But many leaders of many organizations have told me privately that while they would like to undertake the kinds of endeavors I mention in this essay—from growing and supporting new leaders, to engendering more productive norms, to promoting civic engagement—they are not sure they can or will. They say their plates are already too full. Moreover, they worry about offending other groups and individuals in the community—sometimes because they don’t want to be perceived as hogging the limelight; at other times for fear of being in the limelight. And there are organizational leaders and board members who are not confident that they can bring along their own boards to support new or broader civic actions.

Another significant reality I encountered in nearly every community is that while there are many organizations—literally scores upon scores—that successfully fill a particular niches in the community, there are far fewer, if any, that span boundaries and dividing lines to bring people together, incubate new ideas, hold up a mirror to the entire community,

“People must create their own pathways for engagement.”
and [hence] build true collaborations. I call these groups “boundary-spanning organizations.” Among the few such organizations that do exist, many operate with a very thin capacity to do so—sometimes with limited staff, or with staff they hired for some task that was never intended to connect to the civic work that needs to get done.

What all these conditions add up to is this: There are too few pathways in communities for people and organizations to engage in public life and politics to bring about change and hope. Opportunities that do exist oftentimes reflect an approach for people to “plug in” to narrowly constructed, predetermined activities. Time and again, people are told when to show up, where to go, and what to do. Sometimes this may be just what is needed, but if our wish is for people to engage in public life, if we want them to make engagement part of their daily lives and not just something they do as a one-time special project, then people must also be able to create their own pathways for engagement, pathways that give people more opportunities to engage when they are ready, at their own pace, and in their own ways. This will require different kinds of leaders, new organizations that span dividing lines in communities, more robust social networks, more productive norms, and other changes that help foster the conditions whereby people can tap their own potential to make a difference and join together to forge a common future.

The consumer mind-set has effects on public life and politics, and in these conversations people complained bitterly that few wanted to think about the community as a whole, about the public good. Admittedly, I was the one who introduced the term public good into these discussions; but, that said, I found that the phrase resonated deeply. They would tell me that the notion of the public good is missing nowadays; that people are not coming together around interests larger than themselves. Fortunately, my observation (in Hope Unraveled) that people have retreated from public life and politics into close-knit circles of families and friends doesn’t mean that people wish to stay retreated.

People want to find a way back into public life and politics.

I began my book tour holding the clear belief that hope is at the core of people finding their way back into public life and politics from their close-knit circles of families and friends. That belief hasn’t changed. Crisscrossing the nation yet another time has only reinforced and actually deepened my belief.

There is significant agreement among people in America today that hope is pivotal to reengaging people in our society, reconnecting people to one another, and bringing about change on matters of deep but everyday concern. Yet in our desire to create hope, we can actually find ourselves moving in the wrong direction by unknowingly or unwittingly peddling false hope. We set expectations for change that are too ambitious because we believe such expectations will attract supporters or funding—even if we know they are unattainable; we

“People are not coming together around interests larger than themselves.”
make pledges and promises we know we cannot meet and therefore ought not to make; we create benchmarks and then fail to follow up on them because maybe no one is looking—when actually they are; we exaggerate our own successes in brochures, Web sites, speeches, and elsewhere, believing that it is okay to do this because everyone does it! And this promotion of false hope has a corrosive effect on the body politic.

We must pursue a decidedly different path, of what I call authentic hope, if we are to reengage people and create real and lasting change in society. Authentic hope comes when we bring different people together across dividing lines to show that it is possible to do so—and that sometimes those lines are only a function of people’s rhetoric or fears. People gain authentic hope when they are able to put tough issues on the table for public debate, not because people believe the issues can be solved overnight but because acknowledging them is a recognition of their reality and offers a sense of possibility that some change can occur. Authentic hope is gained when we tell stories of people striving to improve conditions, when those stories contain their struggles and even their failings, for then people can see and hear themselves.

We know that more false hope will only deepen people’s retreat and frustration. Our task now is to find new pathways forward.

Don and Mary live in a small town on the Gulf Coast hit by Hurricane Katrina. The town traces its origins back to an 18th-century French settlement. Don’s family has been part of the community since 1831. Mary’s family hasn’t; she came from Pennsylvania for a vacation—and stayed, as have other northern transplants. The residents of the community include Creoles descended from French and West African ancestors, as well as a large group of fishermen who recently arrived from Southeast Asia. There have been some tensions among these different groups but, fortunately, no serious clashes.

The hurricane destroyed a good many houses, and Don and Mary are still living with relatives in the area. Their hardware store was damaged, though not badly, and they were able to reopen within a year. Business is slow, however, because many people left for less vulnerable areas of the state. The fishing industry was hit very hard; boats were blown inland, and it took considerable effort to get them back into the water. Fishing is a competitive business, yet most families pitched in to help. When the schoolhouse collapsed, churches that survived made space available for classes while a new building was being constructed. Don volunteers at the local fire station, which received supplies from a station in another small town two states away. This assistance was critical while waiting for state and federal support to arrive. Crime has gone up, but the police chief has begun a program of community-assisted policing, which he hopes will be effective if neighbors will participate.

“We protect or improve a community, citizens have to come together as a community.”

... afterthoughts

by David Mathews
The big news is that outside developers, aided by a planning grant from the state development office, are considering buying up a large tract of land just south of the town limits to build a “world class resort.” Some people see prosperity just around the corner; others worry that the developers will dominate the reconstruction and shut them out of the decision making about the community’s redevelopment. This prompted some concerned citizens to meet every week at the fire station to develop their own plans for the future of the community. Mary, who is familiar with Kettering research, wrote the foundation to ask whether any of our findings might be helpful to that group.

Something like what I have just described did actually happen, although I have changed the names and generalized from several distinct experiences. And since then, we here at the foundation have been asking ourselves what our research has to offer communities in similar circumstances. I had this question in mind when I read the articles in this Review. The question poses a fair challenge to research on democracy.

The reason for beginning these “afterthoughts” with a story about a town on the Gulf Coast wasn’t to claim that this town is representative of all communities, nor was it intended to begin a discussion of Katrina. The Don and Mary story is significant because the people living there didn’t ask themselves what the concept of “community” meant or why their community was important. And there was no question they had to act, although there were differences of opinion about how. People wanted to restore their community—both its buildings and way of life—and felt that they had to come together as a community to do that. The community was both their objective and the means of reaching that objective. The community in the latter sense is the dynamic sum of what John Dewey called “associated activity,” which he believed is a condition for creating the sort of community people on the Gulf wanted to restore. Dewey was right. Communities that have come together to counter the effects of losing an industry, for instance, have discovered that the coming together has begun to improve conditions even before their recovery strategy itself produced results.

What is so obvious on the Gulf Coast may be less obvious in other towns and cities, although it is equally true. To protect or improve a community, citizens have to come together as a community. They have to come together if they hope to exercise some control over the future of the place where they live and raise their families. There are some problems that one group of people or one institution can’t solve alone, such as the problems that were obvious after Katrina. If citizens don’t act together, their fate will be determined by outside forces, or by the internal divisions that too often tend to keep them from joining forces.

What, then, do those who have spent their careers thinking about self-government have to say to towns like the one where Don and Mary live? This Review has a good sample of what has been written about democracy and community; Don, Mary, and their neighbors would probably agree with most of it. Even after the physical devastation, people know that a community is more than a group of buildings, that it is a way of life with a moral dimension or social values. Dewey and Rich Harwood also recognized that. Most citizens would certainly agree with Dewey that communication is critical.
They would also place the same importance on the role of social relationships (beginning with those in families) that Robert Nisbet does. And yet when they met at the fire station to talk over what needed to be done, Don and Mary—like Nisbet—would say that the purpose of the association was action, not sociability. No one in the meetings would be surprised that the conversations continued in stores, after church, on the streets, and in parking lots—all places where the face-to-face communications that Elijah Anderson describes are essential.

If Mary, Don, and their neighbors talked about how the town had responded to previous crises—as they surely would—they would probably agree with Nisbet that there weren’t many instances when everyone was in full agreement. On the other hand, they might remember times when there was enough of a shared sense for the town to move ahead. They would tell the same kind of stories that Harwood heard about small groups, or “pockets,” where various projects got started; and they would describe how these groups formed alliances with others. People might have trouble recalling—or might have been suspicious of—a purely self-sacrificing group engaging in an all-for-the-common-good enterprise. But they could certainly identify individuals who devoted a lot of time, effort, and money to community causes. They might be more likely to recall instances when groups with different interests, some even self-serving, came together in a successful civic collaboration. As Kwame Appiah notes, average citizens can usually agree on what is and isn’t practical, without becoming ideologically polarized.

The only thing that the people in Don and Mary’s town might find puzzling is what Robert Bellah reports—the red and blue cast put on various points of view about community. They might not understand why some notions of community are considered liberal and others conservative. This ideological stereotyping seems to pit individual privacy, and the freedom to act as one wishes, against collective responsibility and action. In actual communities, people understand that both are essential and, rather than being opposites, that they are two sides of the same coin. The security that a community provides allows individuals their freedom of action, as long as it doesn’t endanger the freedom of others. And the respect for privacy, which is a prized social value, makes possible a community that isn’t oppressive. A community is like rubber; it is both solid and elastic. People are constantly associating and disassociating; they seem to have an instinct about when to seek out others and when to leave them alone. It is when this balance fails that communities get into trouble. And because that does happen, the boundary line between private and collective interests has to be constantly renegotiated.

The most relevant literature for communities like Don and Mary’s recognizes the same realities that are painfully evident on the Gulf Coast: communities are important to people. And to protect or improve them, citizens have to work together as a community. Some of the best examples of this literature are the studies done by health professionals, public administrators, and scholars on natural disasters. They know what Don and Mary know: communities are our first line of defense in a crisis, and their importance doesn’t end when the crisis has passed.

The Center for Biosecurity at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center recently shared a report on community engagement as a means of responding to catastrophic health crises. The
report is quite clear that these calamities require the collective efforts of citizens, not just office-holders. In fact, the report continues, officials and their professional staffs can’t do their jobs without civic support. The report notes, however:

Emergency authorities … have mistakenly interpreted citizen-led interventions … as evidence of failure on the part of responders. In reality, government leaders, public health and safety professionals, and communities-at-large have complementary and mutually supportive roles to play.

Citizens working together, not just heroic individuals, have to carry out search-and-rescue missions, provide medical aid, and meet the social needs of victims—all with institutional support, when available. Individual defensive measures, such as stockpiling food and water, don’t provide the security that only “resilient neighborhoods” can, according to these biosecurity experts.

Without a doubt, citizens in some communities may not be prepared to carry out their responsibilities. There are cases when they have panicked and resorted to self-protective measures at the expense of others. That is less likely to happen when democratic practices have become community habits. Regardless of who the actors are, citizens or institutions, community action can be broken down into a series of interrelated routines: problems have to be identified; options for solving them have to be sorted out; decisions made about a course of action; resources marshaled; actions effectively organized; and the results evaluated. These tasks have been carried out since the dawn of human history and are still being carried out in every community. They may or may not, however, be carried out democratically. Whether they are democratic practices depends on the role citizens play.

The literature is reasonably helpful in describing the role of citizens in some of these tasks but almost silent on others. Harwood has written a great deal about how people become civically engaged. He has found that people become involved in the most ordinary ways, like talking to neighbors about common problems: traffic that endangers children, lack of city services, drug paraphernalia on the curb. Kettering has reason to believe that the way these problems are named and who names them is crucial. So is the way issues are framed and decisions are made. These activities become open to citizens by the way they are carried out, and a number of Kettering publications explain what makes the difference. From this point on, however, we know far less about how citizens can be effective in implementing decisions they have made. And this is precisely what Don and Mary need to know most.

Once people are attentive and engaged, they have to make difficult decisions about how to act. And after they have made these decisions, they have to identify resources, commit them, organize their efforts, and learn from what they have done so they can stay on track. Institutions have well-honed means for doing all of these things. They have money, equipment, trained personnel, and the legal authority to commit their resources or contract for those they need. They also have well-developed protocols for planning, organizing, and coordinating their efforts, and they usually have precise, qualitative methods for assessing whether they have met predetermined goals.

Citizens themselves usually don’t have these resources. When disaster strikes, people are
initially on their own; and even afterward they may not see it as adequate or appropriate to turn matters completely over to professionalized civic organizations. So what do they do? Typically, they form ad hoc associations or work through local institutions like churches. Yet they meet challenges at every turn. One of the first—and it is not unreasonable—is skepticism about what citizens can accomplish in a society that operates primarily on scientific knowledge and trained technical skills. For instance, I have heard that restoring New Orleans was primarily a job for the Corps of Engineers since only the Corps could repair levees. Certainly, citizens don’t repair levees by hand anymore. But if they did, what would cause them to commit their resources and not hold back, waiting for someone else to make the sacrifice? And are there not other demands on the community, made by the crisis, regardless of the engineers’ work on the levees?

Suppose the people in Don and Mary’s town have useful resources at their disposal and are willing to commit them. A significant challenge still lies ahead: effective organization. How can little pockets of engaged citizens ever mount an effective assault on serious problems without a central command structure? And how can whatever one group of citizens learns from its efforts be transmitted to the community as a whole? Individuals may learn; even organizations may learn; but whole communities? Typically, evaluating civic ventures is turned over to outside evaluators using externally developed tests to measure success or failure, but that doesn’t promote the collective learning on which successful democratic practice depends.

Surely our understanding of how democracy works should have something to say about meeting these challenges. The literature on democracy has a good deal to say about ideals like “fraternity, liberty, and equality,” to use Dewey’s words, yet as he argued, these are hope- less abstractions if they have no application to the real-life problems of communities.

The challenges that communities face all boil down to one issue: have their citizens been reduced to ineffective amateurs in a professionalized, expert-driven, global world? The answer varies with the nature of the tasks I have described. There is less skepticism about what ordinary folk can do in the case of some tasks than others. There isn’t much objection to the claim that citizens have valid names for problems, which come from their personal experiences. Dewey recognized this when he observed that while most of us can’t make shoes, we all know when ours pinch. It is also generally conceded that these names imply options for action. If I say that the children in our community have too little exposure to responsible adults, I am implying that adults ought to be more active in programs for young people. Similarly, the claim that citizens can make sound decisions on their own, while debatable, may be accepted. Resistance comes when the argument is made that citizens have critical resources and can organize themselves effectively to use those resources.

Dewey didn’t expect people to be able to repair their own shoes. The biosecurity experts, however, have done Dewey one better. They do expect citizens to make repairs because they recognize the limits of their expertise and of the resources of our most powerful institutions. That is not the case with all professionals: many expect to be the real actors, with citizens only playing supporting roles. Many isn’t all, however.
Two scholars with different views of what citizens can do come to mind: John McKnight at Northwestern University and Ronald Heifetz at Harvard University. I wrote about their research in *Politics for People*. Heifetz, who was trained as a physician before coming to teach government, pointed out that while doctors can solve certain medical problems like a broken arm, other problems like diabetes require people to do some things (controlling their diets) and physicians to do others.

The same is true of community problems; there is a technical remedy for some (rebuilding Mary and Don’s schoolhouse) but not for others (countering the rise in crime). Citizens have to act on these. But will they or can they? Don and Mary seem like resourceful members of the middle class. They have college degrees, after all. There isn’t as much question about their abilities as there is about those people who live in the poor sections of town, people with little education and limited skills. But McKnight and his colleague, John Kretzmann, have spoken to this question through their research: they have found untapped talents in the poorest neighborhoods that can be combined into collective capacities. These include a capacity for economic revitalization that grows out of people’s skills, people whose limitations are offset when they, as citizens, exercise their ability to work together. I think the people in Mary and Don’s community would be interested in what Heifetz and McKnight have to say because citizens aren’t likely to master the problems they face unless they are able to think about them in fresh and insightful ways. And Heifetz and McKnight have unconventional insights. They have more to offer than formulas, which aren’t likely to be any more helpful than ideological arguments.

I have come to believe that what we need are more gritty details of what happens when citizens try to decide what they can do as citizens, when they try to get commitments of resources, and when they come to act in complementary ways without central direction, as Don and Mary’s neighbors did immediately after the hurricane. Most of all, I wish we had more details about how people learn as a community, because I suspect that collective learning, more than anything else, determines how much control people are able to exercise over their future.

This self-determination through self-rule is what I believe democracy is all about.

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