

The ephemerality of community

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Abstract:

On the last night of the Bandito's Run in Virginia City, Montana, the band (Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons) was basically breaking up. Sure, they were going to replace JR on bass, but all the fans knew the music would never quite be the same. For one, the fanbase is so small and tightknit that many fans had become close friends of JR. Not only was he important for his contribution to the music, but he was a part of the 'community.' He camped with the fans, drank with them, went out for meals with them, played softball with them. The invisible line separating 'rock stars' from their fans was non-existent in this music scene. So when he played his final notes with the Jackmormons in 2014, everyone knew what lay ahead would be a decidedly different experience on a number of levels. – From the author's journal.

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Article:

On the last night of the Bandito's Run in Virginia City, Montana, the band (Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons) was basically breaking up. Sure, they were going to replace JR on bass, but all the fans knew the music would never quite be the same. For one, the fanbase is so small and tightknit that many fans had become close friends of JR. Not only was he important for his contribution to the music, but he was a part of the 'community.' He camped with the fans, drank with them, went out for meals with them, played softball with them. The invisible line separating 'rock stars' from their fans was non-existent in this music scene. So when he played his final notes with the Jackmormons in 2014, everyone knew what lay ahead would be a decidedly different experience on a number of levels. – From the author's journal.

On 22 May 1964, then President of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson, gave a commencement address at the University of Michigan that came to be known as ‘The Great Society’ speech. In it he said:

The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents. It is a place where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness. It is a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for *community*. (Emphasis added)

But just what was this ‘community’ that Johnson declared we all hungered for? The concept of community is aspirational, even engaging, but just as often it is enigmatic and quixotic. It is bandied about by those in the academy, and the lay population, to refer to many different things: a place, a group of people, a quality of relationship, and sometimes a symbol of unity (Creed 2006; Dunlap 2011). When it means so many different things to so many different people, where is its value as a frame of reference? More importantly, do communities really exist in the way we romantically talk about them these days? To be certain, we have moved far away from Ferdinand Tönnies’ ([1887] 2002) original conceptualization, but something about *community* endures. Though does it have any inherent properties?

In an effort to streamline our ruminations on this idea of community we must situate our discussion in the epicenter of the creation of knowledge, our colleges and universities (Benson et al. 2017). The broader mission of the university is to serve the public's interest, to help solve the problems that face us as individuals and *communities*. Because of this, we are in a good career: there will never be any shortage of problems in need of being solved. But as we embark upon a multitude of journeys to chip away at those issues that affect us across the landscape of our ‘great society,’ we have to ask ourselves if we are all speaking the same language – and trying to reach the same goal. Just how do we serve that broad mission of the university if one of the primary goals, community, appears to be elusive?

To be certain, in any delineation, community refers to people in some capacity. But what do we need to know about those people whom we seek to help find, maintain, and build their communities? Those of us that study identity are intrigued by what it means to be an ‘authentic’ individual. As individuals we are ever-evolving, complex beings, continuously responding to our environments and social interactions, our preferences and proclivities, thus suggesting that authenticity is always in a *state* of flux. I am not the same person today that I was twenty years ago. It is safe to assume the same will be true twenty years from now. While certain aspects of my evolving self have no doubt been retained, their relevance to my contemporary life ebbs and flows, as they should. However, in these collective, yet distinct, moments of our personal expressions, enjoyments, and hardships, we are only momentarily that version of ourselves before we evolve yet again. This is due to the ephemerality of experience and its impact on our being. If our authentic selves change with the passing moments of our lives, so too must the communities of which we comprise – and aspire to.

This is one of the major problems with the academy's embrace of the concept of community: it is unsustainable, and at times, volatile. In a time where globalization has ‘flattened’ the world

(Friedman 2005), opening the flood gates of commerce and cultural exchange, and when divisive political and social rhetoric has erased the pillars of civil society, far and wide, to assume that an egalitarian concept like community may be an anchor, or a finish line, is suspect, if not perilous. That, however, does not mean that community no longer retains its aspirational qualities amongst the populace. Because of the steadfast endurance of its appeal, whether realistically attainable or not, we need to continue to look for a place to secure our footing. This does not require discarding the idea of community, simply to understand it in a different form.

What the concept of community has evolved into today is really what Herman Schmalenbach (1977) called communion: the loss of one's sense of self in the collective; an unsustainable, fleeting moment of connection. When people use the term community to refer to a place, they do so because it embodies a sense of attachment. When people use community to refer to a quality of relationship or a group of people, it is due to the existential engagement they developed through the experience of fellowship. When people today use community as a beacon for hope, they do so because it is romantic, nostalgic, idealistic, and precious. All that is precious is finite, and it becomes prized solely through its uniqueness against all else that is ordinary.

To be certain, this is not a semantic remix or reductionist treatise of McMillan and Chavis (1986) 'sense of community' which they defined as, 'a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together' (9). This 'shared faith' and feeling that one matters to others are certainly important to enduring relationships, without doubt. But these properties are ethereal. Assuming that community can be bound by this type of concrete definition takes away from the value of what it actually is, thus downplaying the meaningful, visceral social exchanges that summon its perhaps sole property of preciousness.

And while some have attempted to isolate communion from community (Harmon and Kyle 2016), the splitting of hairs may be of no great practical value. For if we are to continue to rely on community as a referential concept for building societal cohesion and bringing together diverse and disparate networks, then we must do so through the grasp of those who comprise the community – everyday people – and we must start to treat the idea as something that can be grasped by those we seek to help. Everyday people live their lives one day at a time. Each singular day is lived in a continuous stream of interactions and reactions, a constant processing of those experiences as they relate to each individual experience in their life's context. Because of this, it may be time to accept that community *only* exists in the moment. This would force us to acknowledge the transient preciousness that is evocative of community.

States of being like happiness and anger are transitory. Being able to feel the range of emotions in our lives is something that is unique to the human experience, and something that we are all summoned to do throughout our life. Openly embracing each emotion is valuable to the cultivation and accumulation of the self, and just as importantly, to the bridging of selves to one another. If we approach the concept of community as a state of being, instead of a fixed, concrete point of reference, we may find it has especially higher levels of practical and theoretical application than the unicorn which has alluded us for quite some time. The burden no longer should be on finding the mythical community, but instead on the acknowledgment of the importance of the moment where the connection is established or the relationship

strengthened; *that* should be the point of reference that allows for something bigger to be created. Community exists in the moment, but its product is evident in the progress and connections it may yield.

Louis de Bernières (1995), in his novel *Corelli's Mandolin*, delineated the difference between being 'in love' and the experience of feeling loved. He said:

Love is a temporary madness, it erupts like volcanoes and then subsides. And when it subsides, you have to make a decision. You have to work out whether your roots have so entwined together that it is inconceivable that you should ever part. Because this is what love is. Love is not breathlessness, it is not excitement, it is not the promulgation of promises of eternal passion, it is not the desire to mate every minute of the day; it is not lying awake at night imagining that he is kissing every cranny of your body. No, don't blush, I am telling you some truths. That is just being "in love," which any fool can do. Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away, and this is both an art and a fortunate accident.

Our path forward, then, might just be to build *from* that which 'any fool can do' to that which will allow our roots to grow together. Being 'in love' is something that is supposedly accessible to us all, something that everyone can dream of and aspire to. But as Bernières implies, that passing moment of being in love signals the *potential* for the enduring love that lies ahead. Being in love, however, does not guarantee the long-lasting fruits of love any more than the 'assumption of a perfect unity of human wills as an original or natural condition' denotes the reality of the contemporary community (Tönnies, [1887] 2002, 37). All that glitters is not gold: the search for the great community might really be a fool's errand. It is the understanding of its fragile, precious, and ephemeral nature that is its true essence we must embrace going forward.

Johnson (1964) stated in his commencement address that,

The Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.

It would seem that Johnson prognosticated this challenge to our contemporary acceptance of community, realizing that community is not a promised land to be reached. The community we aspire to is insatiable; that is why he chose the verb *hunger* in his declaration: community is not to be aspired to, community resides in the aspiration itself.

I had conducted my interview with Julia at the 2013 rendition of the Bandito's Run; she couldn't make 2014 due to work issues, but had the announcement of JR leaving the band not been so abrupt, I'm sure she would have done whatever she could to make the trip. She mentioned in that interview that her fellow fans were so close they really didn't need the band anymore: 'We could have fun in Topeka [Kansas] on a Wednesday with just us!' Shortly after JR left the band – with whom she and her husband Kurt were very close – the two largely broke ties with the music scene, only seeing shows that were near their Denver, Colorado home. They used to be staples at all the major events in Portland, Oregon, Virginia City, Montana, Eureka, California, and

elsewhere. But now that the 'community' no longer resembled their nostalgic vision; it ceased to be one for them. – From the author's journal.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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