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A Community of Quality

NEXT TO THE FAMILY, the community is the most important centre of the activities that make life human, civilized and cultured. No other environment contributes so significantly to nourish the intimate values of life.

Grave-digging authors and lecturers are busy burying the community spirit under tons of words in praise of political take-over, with management by computers, statistics and experts. However, you cannot make a community by law. Governments on all levels from municipal to federal are learning this through their abortive efforts to impose neighbourhood redevelopment programmes without consulting and involving the people who live there.

Citizens interest themselves in community work for many reasons. It is a safeguard against too much government; it satisfies the desire to contribute something to humanity; it broadens experiences and the mind; it gives a person something to do that is worth while. It provides fellowship.

The good citizen is not a romantic idealist. He forms a plan for improving his environment, he wins supporters, he rallies helpers, he cements the blocks of his edifice with work.

People living in the same neighbourhood differ greatly, but they have these things in common: (1) They have inherited characteristics; (2) They have acquired experiences; (3) They are seeking a happy way of living; (4) They cope with an environment that is the same for all of them.

Community life is not congealed, but plastic. People are not satisfied with negative values, like absence of this or that nuisance. They seek positive betterment. There is, nevertheless, not enough thought given to the improvement of things today. Millions who look forward with pleasurable anticipation to walking the streets of a beautiful celestial city are apathetic about improving the street on which they live. As someone pointed out, everyone expects to pass the examination at St. Peter's gate, but very few are practising on the harp.

Where is the community?

The most important features of citizenship for men and women are nearer to their own doorstep than to the provincial or national capitals.

The community of individuals, in hamlet, village, town or city, endowed with limited political autonomy, supports such primary institutions as churches and schools, and organizes secondary institutions like young people's associations, fraternal societies, and centres for recreational and artistic activities.

A community of people is not a unique type any more than a mammal is a unique type of animal. A mammal may be a mouse or it may be an elephant. A community may be a suburb or it may be an apartment block or any place in between where people live. It is looked upon by social scientists in terms of human nature — the interests, wishes, desires and purposes of human beings interacting with other human beings.

The quality of a community cannot be expressed in any single phrase. It is the collective name for a great number of different things, every one of which is beneficial in nourishing the essential values of life. The community is the background, foreground and setting of a person's home.

The answers to some questions will reveal whether a particular community is meeting the minimum needs of its people. Does the community as it is at present constituted offer you the opportunity to attain a sense of developing self-fulfillment? Does it provide a feeling of security? Does it operate so as to increase the reliability of your value judgments by testing them in purposive action? Does it function in such a way as to extend the range of the interests in which you can participate effectively?

Democracy in action

Our greatest opportunity to participate in democratic processes is in our communities. Good community citizens do not intrude upon the personal territory of others to dictate or decide in what way those persons shall pursue happiness. The considerate person will do his part in helping to build a community in which everyone has the chance to be happy in his own way.

Broadly speaking, there are two sorts of well-meaning people working toward the same objective. There are those who believe that community problems can and should be solved by persuasion, negotiation, and compromise. That is the democratic way. Others think that the problems can be solved only by imposing laws. These are the people who often dismiss a problem by saying: "If I were a dictator I should . . ."

Men and women in those nations where it was thought that the solution of their problems would be found by turning over their lives to unrestricted political control awoke to find that the temporary improvement of their condition did not guarantee them future security.

Democracy is a system of values. It depends upon sympathy, understanding, mutual aid and the warm appreciation of personality.

There are many cross-currents of interest — spiritual, cultural, political, civic, economic, educational and social — in every community. Conflicts inevitably arise, but the extent to which a persistent effort is made to achieve harmony is a measure of the success of a community in establishing a civilized mode of life.

Paternalistic social legislation does not touch the intimate lives of people, but merely makes it possible for them to live. It is in community effort that we rediscover the personal meaning of a helping hand. Dr. Samuel Johnson was afflicted by the difficulty of making other people happy. In her anecdotes of Johnson, Hester Piozzi said that he "nursed whole nests of people in his house, where the lame, the blind, the sick, and the sorrowful found a sure retreat from all the evils whence his little income could secure them."

Voluntary contribution is motivated, some will say, by self-interest. Every improvement in the life of people in the community is a personal advantage to everyone in it. But contribution to the good of the community is more than that: it is an expression of the natural good qualities people have. A high-minded citizen has a desire to serve his neighbour by putting at his disposal the fruits of his knowledge, the results of his studying, and the product of his talent.

Among the members of every community there are to be found many capabilities, ideas and skills. Practically every normal-minded human being possesses great stores of undeveloped potentialities. Not only can he extend help as a friend in his neighbours' calamities, but he can project his abilities into planning improvement so that crises do not arise. Business men who are accustomed to doing a great deal of long-range planning for the firms which provide them with their living find satisfaction in doing just a thimbleful for the communities in which they live their lives.

Partnership and objectives

People do not become part of a community merely by being together, but rather by sharing interests and

engaging in activities to further the welfare of the group. The strongest bond between people is the feeling of having common problems, common values, and common hopes.

Society is a series of interdependencies. If a shipload of men, women and children were cast ashore on Robinson Crusoe's island they would not form a community until they had reached agreement about getting a living and living together. To be in a community is to be in partnership. The community will grow better and prosper insofar as it attracts people who plan, work, play, and act together.

Many community matters are not of the sort that can be dealt with by money, technology or politics. The planning of streets and buildings does not build a community: it is the people who live there who determine whether a community exists.

People count more than things. The rows of little houses in Canada's suburbs, deplored by some critics as "sprawl," have valuable human qualities. They represent independence, thrift, willingness to undertake responsibility, and the desire for freedom to breathe in the open spaces.

The main purpose behind every community effort should be to seek goodness of life for people. In Leigh Hunt's poem, Abou Ben Adhem said to the angel:

"I pray thee then,
Write me as one that loves his fellow-men"
. . . And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

The annual report of a municipality should be more than a tabulation of taxes collected and money spent. The real purpose of the administration is not to collect and expend money. The question to be answered at the year's end is: "Did we meet the human needs of the people?"

Listen to youth

Listen to the young people. They want to be an effective part of the human race. They are excited by the idea of what they can contribute. They have views unencumbered by defeats, disappointments and disillusionment.

They are passionate about causes and issues, and are more likely to join enthusiastically in a thoroughgoing reform than in a half-way palliative measure.

Young people have needs. It is not an efficient answer to today's street-corner culture to keep a child under house-arrest. The community must provide out-of-school activities and healthful outlets for creative energies. Encourage young people to organize their own councils and boards, so that they attain responsibility by having a voice in community projects and activities. Give them the space, the opportunity, and the tools to make their own games places and sports fields.

Here is a new career

Everyone should, for his own satisfaction, concern

himself with a project in the community which commands his real interest, so that he pursues with ardour some rewarding activity. Believing in goodness is an admirable virtue, but it is not enough to earn a star in your crown. Contributing to the goodness of the community is.

Here is a new career that can be added to or combined with one already being practised: community craftsman. The steps are simple: (1) Find a deficiency or a problem in community affairs; research it; uncover what theories and solutions have been proposed and attempted. (2) Make a rough draft of your ideas for improvement, and comment on their feasibility. (3) From your revised draft prepare a programme for action. (4) Try out your idea on your friends, on casual contacts in stores and at parties. If valuable suggestions are made, modify your draft so as to include them. (5) Prepare a formal outline and present it at a suitable meeting or to a group specially brought together.

George deHuszar says in his handbook *Practical Applications of Democracy* (Harper & Bros. 1945): "Seek something which affects you, in which success means betterment for yourself and others. Find those among your friends who share this interest. There is no necessity to become a social reformer or even step widely from your regular routine of life, but you can use the dynamics of personal contact plus common interest to produce action which will make your life and that of the community more sound and creative."

Community work is self-developing work. It is significant that in giving the advice "go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor" the speaker was not thinking of the state of the poor but of the soul of the young man. Governor General Vanier said in an address: "Many people have a strong and inborn need to give generously of themselves. To satisfy this need they require to do more than merely reach for their cheque books."

If a person is to have dignity — to hold his head high — he must make his contribution to life. It is in the community that man feels what he is and has a chance to become what he can be. Through association with others in church, school, club and recreation the individual gets a sense of status and a sense of social acceptance and support.

Institutions and agencies

Organizations in the community — church, civic, fraternal, home and school, political and service — give people an opportunity to associate in cultivating mutual interests. They provide patterns of conduct and activities of the sort needed by individuals who are seeking to grow in maturity of mind and spirit.

Distributing responsibility among a number of these institutions is not the final step in constructing an enlightened community. It is meritorious to support agencies that are specially fitted to do necessary social jobs, but every individual shares in addition the obligation to add his personal contribution.

The established social agencies help to ensure that the best possible services are given. They are at the hub of welfare activities of all sorts. They provide leadership and technical skill. Professional social workers are men and women who have prepared themselves by education and practice to perform duties necessary to the well-being of various classes of people — the needy, the disabled, the maladjusted and the ill. Their remedial and alleviative work on behalf of handicapped members of the community, their organized prevention of dangerous forces, and their cultivation of social intelligence: these are irreplaceable by unsystematized services given by individuals.

Professional workers and volunteer workers can get along well together, given patience on the part of the professionals and willingness of the volunteers to study the needs, the job that is being done, and their own qualifications to help.

People who serve on the boards of service organizations are not there merely as donors of dollars or to give rubber-stamp approval to agency actions. They provide expert counsel out of the knowledge acquired in their employment or business experience. They convey to the professional staff the mood and response of the public. They provide democratic accountability to the community. They help to solve problems. They assist in raising funds.

An agency established to serve people cannot rely upon a general sentiment in favour of charity. It has to prove to the public that the agency is the proper instrument to perform the task for which it was established, that it knows how it ought to be done, and that it is performing its function effectively and efficiently.

The voluntary organizations fill certain wants of human beings which are not being met by statutory authorities. An old age pension will provide sustenance for the body, but we rely upon volunteers' service of sympathy to relieve the old person's loneliness.

Complex problems involving the union of agency and voluntary service will yield to logical and imaginative methods that are not difficult to learn or to apply. All that is needed is for people who are involved in an enterprise to get together in face-to-face relationships.

Getting started

He is a poor-spirited fellow who observes the interests of the community only to the extent that these are primarily his own interests. Citizens who volunteer to do work in the community are motivated by many reasons, but they need a purpose that is not selfish.

If you feel strongly that remedial action or constructive effort is necessary on some front, get a group together. To organize a group determined to reach the heart of a problem and to set in motion an attempt to solve it is much more effective than to write a letter to the local newspaper or draw up a petition asking some authority to do something about it.

A problem-centred group is an excellent device for community advancement. With it, citizens concentrate on specific problems, help existing associations and services to function better, and attain co-operation between various organizations.

Discussion is part of the group digestive process, essential to understanding. Purposeful group discussion centres on something vital, something in which the members are interested, something about which they feel deeply, and something to the doing of which they can contribute.

What holds society together is reasonable discourse. It leads to joint action. In discussion, members of a group stimulate one another to thought, develop ideas, catch inspiration, and enliven one another with the spirit of team-work.

A group meeting should not be a gathering where fine sentiments about co-operation are expressed in speeches. What is needed is to decide the "What, Who, How?" of handling a situation.

The elevation of picayune particulars should not be allowed at the expense of fruitful talk about ideas and plans. A group will fail utterly if it becomes preoccupied with methodology. No strict adherence to a book of rules is needed, but every meeting should be governed by cardinal principles of parliamentary procedure: justice and courtesy for all; recognition of the will of the majority; protection of the rights of the minority; one thing at a time.

Courteous listening is an important part of attending a meeting, and it is balanced by the courtesy of speaking briefly.

Full, accurate and candid reports to the public of what is planned and the progress being made will take the sting out of criticism that is based on half-truths and rumours. Unless objectives are made known, there will be a state of tension and uneasiness in the community. Every citizen has the right to know how a programme — governmental or community group — will affect him.

Communication is the heart of society. Let people see the good spirit behind every endeavour.

When people campaign for funds to erect a community building or to make a park, they are selling not only a little building or a patch of greenery but these things as symbols of a noble purpose. A project which appeals to the head alone is nothing like so strong as one which appeals both to head and to heart.

And so, to work

We proceed from discussion and planning to action. We have removed the non-essentials and we know what we are going to do.

Do not acquiesce when someone wishes to shift the proposal into established "channels", which frequently flow sluggishly. Do not allow the group's finished plan to be pulled to pieces by ignorant busybodies. Sir Christopher Wren made plans to build a

new London on the ashes left by the great fire, a city in which men and women would live healthier and better lives. It was a chance that destiny offered, but, as Wren's biographer writes, then came "the slow, bitter realization that petty officialdom, personal greed, stupidity, obstinacy, prejudice and sentimentality were massing their dead and deadening weight against him until finally his dream city was utterly lost."

Follow through is needed. Some people are ardent in pursuit of instant gratification of their desires. It would be futile to demand the millennium on the spot, or utopia tomorrow. There is a saddening tendency in some groups and organizations to go all out in research and then fade away when it comes to applying creative thinking and effective action to the facts they have found.

Fitting in

There comes a time when, having changed the environment in which we live, we must modify ourselves somewhat to exist in the new order. Adjustment to environment has always been an important condition of survival in the animal world.

We seek the respect of the society in which we live. What we are in our own eyes is largely determined by the assumptions we make about ourselves. What we are in the eyes of our neighbours is largely determined by their assumptions about us, based upon their observance of our behaviour.

The persons among whom we live have their part to play in providing the environment fit to frame our developing happiness. As Arnold Bennett told us in *How to Live* (Garden City Publishing Co., 1910): They are just as inevitable in the scheme of evolution as we are; they have just as much right to be themselves as we have to be ourselves; they are precisely our equals in the face of Nature; they are entitled to the same latitude as we are entitled to; they are no more responsible for their composition than we are.

Mutual tolerance and co-operation will lead to the point when you call your neighbour "friend" and that means much to both of you.

Every community operates within a set of conditions. No one is compelled to live in any community, but once he moves into it he cannot ignore its customs and standards. The tone of the community furnishes its residents with a routine of life and patterns of expected behaviour by which they will be judged.

Membership in the community derives from a conscious sense of "belonging". People are not a faceless legion, but neighbours and friends.

By belonging, we accept certain responsibilities for constructive contribution. The good citizen will take the fate of his community into his own hands and will shape its destiny by collaborating with other citizens. Then things happen. Problems get solved. Wrong things are made right. The beauty and spirit of the community are enhanced.