

In Search of Community

RALPH KEYES



AN Englishman I know who grew up in a small village in Yorkshire says the most striking quality of the town, and the thing he misses most, was the feeling of being *known* there. He says it wasn't even a spoken thing. Nobody would say anything out loud about your beating your wife. But they knew, you knew they knew, they knew you knew they knew—and in that there was comfort.

There are problems with that kind of life, to be sure. Oppression and gossip. Rigidity. I wouldn't want it. My English friend had fled it. But at least it was an existence where people knew who you were. It was a community.

Today we talk about our "loss of community" in city and suburb. Often we discuss it intellectually. But when we try to be more specific about just what "community" means, we usually think first of a place, the place where we live. And yet when we consider where we find a "sense of community," it's rarely in fact where we live. We use the word interchangeably, but it really means two different things. A *sense of community* is what we find among the people who know us, with whom we feel safe. That seldom includes the neighbors.



It wasn't always so. For most of history man found his sense of community where he lived, with the people among whom he was born and with whom he died. You were *known* within family, including the extended family of relatives. When family became tribe and tribes grew into villages, their members still knew each other to a large degree. Neighbors, friends, and family freely intermingled, were often one and the same. There wasn't much choice. One lived, worked, and died among a small number of faces. One was born into community and belonged automatically; the only alternative to belonging would be to leave. For some that remains true today. But most of us in city and suburb live one place and find "community" in another. Or nowhere. So many of us want back the more intimate sense of community, the one where the grocer knew our name and the

butcher could comment on meat and life.

Business knows, and they're trying to sell that feeling back to us, some sense of community. None of it works, however, and it won't work. The qualities that make a good mass marketer can't also produce a feeling of community. I find it a toss-up as to who loves me more, my local Shakey's Pizza Parlor or Howard Johnson's. But business is hardly pernicious for trying. Their job is to be sensitive to markets, and there's obviously a market for intimacy. The market, however, is a package deal, part of a consumer's double message: give us all the advantages of a supermarket with all the familiarity of a corner store. Sixty-nine percent of 200 Bostonians surveyed in 1970 agreed that "stores are so big these days that the customer gets lost in the shuffle." But 81 percent believed that "supermarkets are a great advance over the corner store."

We want both, and business tries to comply. It's an impossible task. If they're confused, it's because we're confused. It's not that we don't want more community. We do. We crave community. We lust after it. "Community" is a national obsession. But we want other things more. Not getting involved with the neighbors is worth more to us than "community."

It's this confusion, this ambivalence, that confounds our quest for community. We yearn for a simpler, more communal life; we sincerely want more sense of community. But not at the sacrifice of any advantages that mass society has brought us, even ones we presumably scorn.

We didn't lose community. We bought it off. And rediscovering community isn't a matter of finding "the solution." We know how to do it. It's a question of how much we're willing to trade in.

I could find a Mom & Pop store if I really wanted one. But I don't. I prefer a supermarket's prices and selection. Also the anonymity, the fact that I'm *not* burdened by knowing the help. Even as we hate being unknown to each other, we crave anonymity. And rather than take paths that might lead us back together, we pursue the very things that keep us cut off from each other. There are three things we cherish in particular—mobility, privacy, and convenience—which are the very sources of our lack of community.

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"It's astonishing," wrote Scottish journalist Alexander McKay in 1849, "how readily . . . an American makes up his mind to try his fortunes elsewhere." One historian says that "the M-factor"—movement, migration, and mobility—is the shaping influence of our national character. In nearly two decades of studying top corporation executives, industrial psychologist Eugene Jennings has found an increasingly close relationship between mobility and success, leading to what Jennings calls "mobicentricity." "To the mobility-centered person," he explains, "a new American phenomenon, movement is not so much a way to get someplace or a means to an end as it is an end in itself. The mobicentric man values motion and action not because they lead to change but because they are change, and change is his ultimate value."

Those studying communes have found a curious paradox. Experiments in communal living are top-heavy with the root-seeking children of nomadic corporation men. Yet these same utopian ventures are witness to a perpetual flow from one to the next, communards changing communes just as their fathers transferred between corporations. "Repeating this quintessentially American trait," writes an analyst of this movement, "when conditions of communal life become intolerable, the residents simply move elsewhere."

The worst part of mobicentricity may not be the moves themselves so much as the certainty that one will move again, and again, and again. Why get involved with people when you know you'll soon be leaving them? Why get close to anyone, when you know in advance that making friends, close friends, only means more pain at parting? The worst part of mobicentricity is being doomed to travel about seeking one's identity in the eyes of near strangers.

It all leads to a kind of "stewardess syndrome"—smiling warmly at strangers as you part after a few hours, or minutes, as if you had shared the intimacy of a lifetime.

Mobility is a major enemy of the community of intimate friendship. But I'm not clear where it is cause and where effect—whether we're afraid to get close because we're always moving on, or whether we're always moving on because we're afraid to get close.

Mobility has also made a major con-

tribution to the decline of neighborhood life, of our community of place. But in that it's had help, in particular from our love of privacy. Privacy as an ideal, even as a concept, is relatively modern. Marshall McLuhan says it took the invention of print to tear man from his tribes and plant the dream of isolation in his brain. Historian Jacob Burckhardt says that before the Renaissance, Western man was barely aware of himself as an individual. Mostly he drew identity from membership in groups—family, tribe, church, guild.

But since the Renaissance especially, Western man has sought increasing amounts of isolation, of distance from his neighbors. In America, with more land in which to seek elbow room, and with more money to buy it, the ideal of the unfettered individual, rugged, free, and secluded, has reached its zenith. Howard Hughes is the only logical conclusion, an inspiration to us all.

Not all cultures value isolation so, nor have they the means to pursue it. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall points out that neither the Japanese, who live within paper walls, nor the Arabs, whose rooms are huge and few, have a word for "privacy."

In much of the world, shelter is designed for group living with high visibility, courtyards, doors facing streets, and balconies. Town squares are provided for the promenade. Street cafés provide places to see and be seen, a setting in which to linger without guilt. The French make a habit of entertaining in restaurants, and spend outrageous amounts of time lingering in cafés, watching each other. Even the British, in many ways more private than Americans, still drink all but 4 percent of their beer in pubs.

America, settled by footloose singles and nuclear families, has historically had a passion for the private home and little tradition of common space. True, New England does have its greens, and the Southwest retains some Spanish town squares. But such space is exceptional and always subject to the bulldozer.

Street cafés have never caught on in this country, and the New York City Health Department once warned people that it was unhealthy to tarry too long at those which do exist. In general we tend to be suspicious of gatherings without purpose.

Increasing numbers of us suffer from

an "autonomy-withdrawal syndrome," according to the architect-planner C. A. Alexander. Most people, explains Alexander, use their home as an insulation against the outside world, a means of self-protection. Eventually, this withdrawal becomes habitual and people lose the ability to let others inside their secluded world. What begins as a normal concern for privacy soon resembles the pathological.

"The neighbors are perfect," reports University of Southern California football coach John McKay, "I don't know any of them."

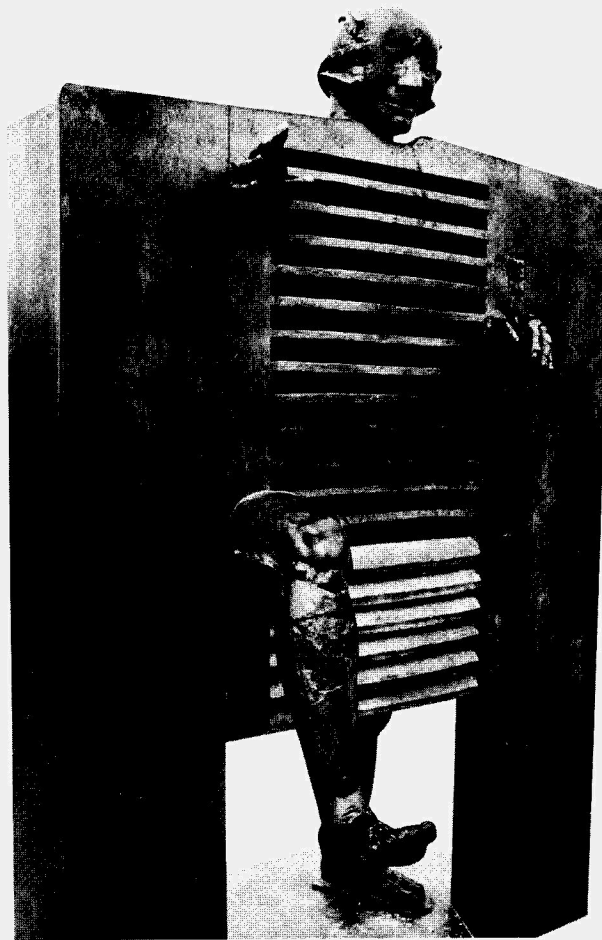
A study of seventy-five white, middle class, male Michigan suburbanites showed that most of their relationships with other men on the block took place standing up. This group of men defined a good neighbor as one who "is available for emergency aid; lends and can be loaned to; respects privacy; friendly, but not friends." Only four of the men said they had neighbors they also considered friends.

We not only use our homes to avoid each other, but we also can do the same thing within the home, with just a little help from modern technology. I once gave a speech on "The Generation Gap" to a women's club. In the discussion afterward, one fiftyish mother stood up and said: "I'm gonna tell you what brought on the whole thing—dishwashers. That's right, dishwashers. I got to know my kids better, they told me more, when we washed dishes together. One would wash, another rinse, and a third dry. We'd fight but we'd also talk. Now that we have a dishwasher, there's no regular time when we get to know each other."

She had fingered clearly something I was sensing only vaguely: that our household conveniences—our whole drive for a *convenient* life—have cut us off from each other. The cooperation and communication that used to accompany life's chores is being built-out of our social systems.

This trend has had more than a little to do with the breakdown of our family system. In the past, the nuclear family has been an important economic unit, all members working together for survival. Today our survival needs are met, and there's no real need to do more than help throw away the vinyl bag from a boil-pack supper.

Eating, according to contemporary nutritionists, has become less and less a



family affair and more and more a matter of "slot-machine snacking." According to one estimate, 28 percent of our food intake is now in the form of snacks outside mealtime. Consider, for example, the effect of individual pudding servings in a can. These not only make it unnecessary to work together in the kitchen preparing dessert, but also reduce the need to consider one's family as a unit, to compromise between chocolate and banana cream when it comes to fixing pudding. All members get their own flavor, right out of the can, whenever they want.

"The basic theme underlying food practices in contemporary American society is *individualism*," writes nutritionist Norge W. Jerome. "The structure, timing and ordering of meals (and snacks) as traditionally defined are yielding to individual patterns of food use." This evolution of our eating patterns has been hard to document. "It may be easier to get people to talk with complete frankness about their sex lives than about the eating patterns of the family," says motivational psychologist Paul A. Fine, who has conducted several surveys of meal habits for food manufacturers.

Fine says that today's average family eating pattern includes little or no breakfast, snacks during the morning, maybe lunch (but not for Mom unless little kids are home), big eating after school, a smaller and smaller supper, and TV snacking that may be supplemented by after-bed refrigerator raids. The sit-down family dinner, he says, seldom takes place more than three nights a week in any family.

That seems a shame. Our family meals were warm, together times, times when the talk rivaled the food for attention. My best memories of home take place around the dining room table.



With our comings and goings inhibiting friendship, a love of seclusion eroding our neighborhoods, and our passion for convenience atomizing the family, it's no wonder we feel a "loss of community." But the distinctions are artificial. Mobility, privacy, and convenience are like a trio, first one playing, then the other, and all three finally coming together to play their song—at our request.

More than any single thing on the American scene, cars unite the triumvirate of values that are wrecking our sense of community. Automobiles are at once our main agent of mobility, the most private place to which we can retire, and a primary source of convenience. When one asks what it is that we must trade in on community, the answer could very well be: our cars.

The great, overlooked seduction of this earth module, the car, is privacy. Cars and bathrooms are the only places where most urban-suburbanites can be completely and blissfully alone. And a car is better than the bathroom. No one can knock and tell you to hurry up.

I initially grew interested in the car as private space when friends of mine began screaming inside their automobiles. The first person to tell me about this, a father of five in his late thirties, explained that within his van, driving to and from work, was the only time he felt free to rage—spit and holler—let it all out. He called it his Private Therapy Van. Just roll up the windows and howl, go crazy if you like. No one will ever know.

Traffic patrolmen with whom I talked said singing is common within cars, especially among women, and many drivers seem just to be talking to themselves.

They say you can tell the difference by whether the driver's head is keeping time with the movement of his lips.

The only problem with criticizing the way cars make us anonymous, unknown, and nasty to each other is the assumption that we'd prefer it any other way. We do, of course, and yet. . . .

It's that ambivalence. We say we'd like to be less cut off from and uncivilized with each other, but another voice within speaks differently. The private car is a place safe to be our other self.

The car itself has had a lot to do with cutting us off from each other by sealing us in cocoons on wheels and making it easy to drive away from each other. But its greater impact may be in the environments we erect to suit the car, environments built for mobility, privacy, and convenience. The process is self-feeding. The more we drive, the less pleasant it becomes to walk down streets that have become noisy, dangerous, and smelly from cars. The less pleasant it becomes to walk, the more we drive. Eventually, custom becomes law.

In 1971 the city council of Dallas passed an antiloitering ordinance that made a crime of: "walking about aimlessly without apparent purpose; lingering; hanging around; lagging behind; the idle spending of time; delaying, sauntering and moving slowly about, where such conduct is not due to physical defects or conditions."

Beverly Hills is the logical conclusion. There the police are notorious for questioning anyone caught walking at night. Long Island, also built to suit cars, is not much better. I spent a lot of my two years on Long Island feeling sorry for its residents—like myself. In all that time I can't remember ever meeting anyone by accident. Or having a place to hang out, a store within walking distance, or anything within walking distance. Life in such environments can be ghastly.

The suburbs are simply not designed for congregation. One suburbanite says that in the subdivision where she lived the better part of a decade, seeing more than three people gathered on the street made her wonder whether a disaster had just occurred and perhaps she ought to inquire.

Shortly after arriving in San Diego, my wife and I checked out the stores close by. The nearest one was 7-Eleven. On their parking lot, kids were hanging around outside, with identical banana-

seat bikes. Inside, the store was just as I remembered it: refrigerated goods in the rear, magazines up front, Slurpee machine by the cash register. All of this made me feel good, secure. There was a familiar place in this strange setting. It seemed like a fresh insight—that I felt right at home at my local 7-Eleven, almost as if we'd never left. Then I started reading up on franchisers and found that's exactly what they want me to feel.

Mobility has a built-in paradox. We move on in search of change. But the more we move, the more identical things become in every region. And the process feeds itself. The more we move, the more alike things become. The more alike things become, the easier it is to move.

We fret about this growing sameness for a variety of cultural and aesthetic reasons but without considering the comfort uniformity provides for a people constantly on the move. As Lewis Mumford points out, the common grid pattern of our towns and cities has historically made strangers as much at home as veterans.

Since franchises grew up after World War II, along with the auto and the freeway explosion, they have housed themselves in very visible buildings that have the advantage of being easily seen from a speeding car. When everything else is a blur through the windshield, Holiday Inn's green, red, and yellow logo is a comforting point of stability. Their 1,500 buildings may seem distinct, but that's an optical delusion. There's really only one Holiday Inn, just as there's only one 7-Eleven, one McDonald's, and a single Colonel Harlan Sanders.

In Oakland, the Institute of Human Abilities is franchising communes and human growth. They buy up dilapidated houses in the Bay Area, redub them "More Houses," then charge the young and lonely \$200 a month to live there and fix up the places. For their money and effort, residents get more than just a place to live. They also get a hero, Victor Baranco, the "heavy" founder/philosopher-king of the Institute; a medallion with the More symbol; a variety of courses in human growth; *Aquarius* magazine; and sixteen More Houses to be welcome at.

The More Houses people know what they're up to. "We are like Colonel Sanders," admits the Institute's president and *Aquarius* editor, Ken Brown. "We can reproduce our thing anywhere. The

product is words. And the attraction is love."

The counterculture generally has built up a rather impressive network of familiarity within the national hometown—ranging from informal places to sleep, through friendly homes listed in guidebooks, communes, and spiritual centers. The new nomads needn't feel much stress on the road.

Laundromats have become an excellent place to meet other citizens of the national hometown, straight and hip alike. Usually unguarded, often open all night, laundromats have become major American hangouts. There's something about laundromats that makes them a much safer, less threatening space than other public mixing points. It's just hard to seem dangerous with a box of Tide in your hands. As a place to gather and share, laundromats differ only in form from the streams running by old hometowns where washers used to congregate. But laundromats have many more purposes to serve in the national hometown. After the Holiday Inn, they may be our leading community center.

Trust is what all these comfort points are about—the laundromats, the ashrams, the communes, the franchises. No matter how they clothe it or what they call it, the uniform gathering places—franchises in particular—are basically marketing trust. When we lived on a smaller scale, we would learn which merchants were trustworthy. Living now as we do throughout the country, we can only grope at symbols, and consistency is the best substitute for intimate knowledge.



A unique breed of "grouper" has grown up in southern California, and perhaps across the nation. With so many encounter groups going on, such people go from group to group getting stroked, enjoying their intimacy seriatim. To this group you reveal what a cad your wife is, to that group you cry about your vicious mother, and to the other about your brother. Then maybe trot out your wife again. If you handle the situation right, and it's not hard, each group of people will love and console you. A weekend's intimacy can sustain you till the next group.

I once asked a leader of a student-adult encounter group in a Long Island school district if they had a gossip problem, since



participants lived near each other and could tell tales. "Oh, no," he replied. "We make sure that people in the groups are strangers to each other." Then he leaned forward affirmatively. "It's not the sort of thing you'd want to do with friends and neighbors."

It's as if we're trying to make our opportunities for intimate community, the times when we'll peek from behind the mask, as handy and convenient as a TV dinner. A time to cry, to reveal, to take off one's shoes and relax is a human necessity. To do so with friends, even with family (especially with family), is scary and risky. It might lead to rejection, even worse—to commitment.

The safest, most convenient alternative is to seek a few days' intimacy with strangers, love, and let loose. Psychologist Richard Farson says, "The people who will live successfully in tomorrow's world are those who can accept and enjoy temporary systems."

So what we're doing is developing temporary love systems, hit-and-run intimacy, self-destructing communities that are making closeness just as convenient and just as disposable as a two-week guided tour.



I'm fascinated, driving down the highway, by the number of campers that are complete with name-and-address plates just as if they were home. "The New-

mans," a plate will say, "Bayside, Texas." Sometimes a little message will be added, like, "Y'all come see us." And the new campers find the community they seek. Their changing cast of neighbors will be gone in a few days, so there's little risk in getting close.

This is a lot of the appeal of hitchhiking. "It's a special feeling," wrote one guy hitching across the country. "Meeting other people and throwing in for a while together. There's a trust."

Airlines understand our hunger for intimacy-in-passing better than any sociologist alive. Disposable community has become their bread and butter. United wants me to fly their "Friendly Skies," in "Friend Ships." Southwest Airlines calls itself, "The Somebody Else Up There Who Loves You." Passengers boarding one of their flights are greeted by a stewardess saying, "Hi, I'm Suzanne, and we're so glad to have you on our flight. You-all buckle up your safety belts and don't dare get up. We don't want anything happening to you now, because we love you."

Airplanes are forced to *become* community, and they serve up intimacy because their customer's hunger is so great. The airlines knew that they had become the community they once served long before most of us had a notion. But we're beginning to catch up. That transformation—from *servicing* community to *being* community—is revolutionizing our social institutions.

New courts and juries have entered another incarnation and are floating free of any community except the one they have become themselves. Today's jury *is* the community, a family even. And so the circle is completed. When we lived on a smaller scale, juries consisted of community members *known* to another member on trial. As we grew larger, we sought refuge in the objectivity of anonymity, of jurors *unknown* to the person being tried. Now we're in the third stage. The courtroom is a community, the judge a father, each jury a family, and the defendants prodigal sons. Trials provide the opportunity to come to *know* each other once again, to become community. Justice has been communalized.

The evolution is from bureaucracy to brotherhood. Do you dislike waiting anonymously in line? Get to know the other people and make the queue family. Is the multiversity giving you the "just another number" blahs? Shut it down and

become a community.

This evolution of our social institutions is pandemic. As whatever sense of community we have had is sacrificed in tribute to cars, seclusion, and dishwashers, those institutions that used to serve a community of people now must *become* a community of people in order to function.



Families Anonymous is just one of the self-help groups that are springing up in this country like dandelions after a rain. Many are anonymous, patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous. Other groups, without being "anonymous," are bringing together Vietnam veterans to talk out their fears, POW wives to share frustrations, or unemployed aerospace engineers to share despair.

De Tocqueville anticipated this development a century and a half ago. He saw our drive to associate, even in the early 1830s, growing inevitably out of our rootlessness and the lack of relatedness he considered inherent in a democratic society. The only thing new in our drive to belong is the degree of disconnectedness Americans feel, and the added weight we put on our associations to be not only community but also family.

A biker says of his gang, "Our chapter is like a brotherhood. Strong. Strong. We're real tight. One of us cries, we all cry. One laughs, we all laugh. That's the thing about the Aliens. We're a family."

The Aliens. A family.

After completing the Dale Carnegie course, an insurance executive boasted, "Now there's a lot more cooperation in our department. . . . We enjoy working together so much we're really more like a family."

A family.

When Oregon's Governor Tom McCall decided against running for the Senate in 1972, he explained, "My prime commitment is to Oregon and the Oregon family. I feel I can do the most effective job for Oregon by finishing what the Oregon family reelected me to finish two years ago."

The Oregon family.

I don't know much about lexicography, but when a word becomes that popular and that diverse in the ways it's used, some of the original meaning has obviously been lost.

We do seek community. There's no question about it. But also we're scared

of it. So we seek a safe community, one in which we needn't be fully known. We want to preserve as much as we can of our privacy, our conveniences, as well as the freedom to pick up and move on. The logical conclusion, the direction we're headed, is what Henry Burger calls "agapurgy," the industrialization of affection. An anthropologist at the University of Missouri, Burger says that although America has done badly at providing enough "tender loving care" to go around, we do have a demonstrated genius for mass production and sophisticated technology. Therefore, why not apply the strength to the weakness: build love machines; Friend-O-Mats; or, as he calls it, "the mass production of affect." We're already in the primitive stages of agapurgy. But it won't work. Agapurgy won't work any more than TV and magazine communities work—or dialed counseling, franchised friendship, bumper-sticker conversation, thumb-lock trust, encounter-group love, tribal clubs, or self-help groups. None of them work as community because none is a place where we're known whole.

We want to be known, whole, and yet. . . .

If any or all of our approaches worked, we wouldn't be suffering such an epidemic of loneliness.

A year before his death, W. H. Auden left New York and returned to England. The poet said he regretted leaving his adopted home of more than three decades but explained: "It's just that I'm getting rather old to live alone in the winter, and I'd rather live in community. Supposing I had a coronary. It might be days before I was found."

Auden fingered what, for me, is the minimum criterion of being in community, for being known: that my absence, as well as my presence, be noted. The minimum question about whether a group of people is really a community for me is: "Would anyone notice if I didn't show up?" It's a frightening question, perhaps the most scary one I could put to a group of people. I'd dread what the answer might be.

Better not to ask it at all—anywhere.

This fear, I think, fuels a lot of our frantic rushing around—the feeling that if we just keep moving we'll have an excuse never to raise such a question with any group of people. Today we're free to choose and reject, be chosen or rejected.

This right to choose is a liberation, and also a tyranny. It's much easier to be thrust into community from your mother's womb, with the alternative only to leave. The opposite choice—to ask to be included in community—is terrifying and excruciating, a choice rarely made.



Millions of us have gladly rejected the suffocation of total community, and even the partial oppression of churches or clubs, where we were once known and scrutinized. We feel well rid of that kind of oppression. At least I do. But we forget to provide anywhere for the fellowship that went hand in hand with suffocation. The sermons may have been a drag, but the potlucks weren't so bad.

Rather than moon about the old potlucks, though, we'd do better to build a new community now, at home. We keep remembering the small towns and stores because we want back some of their qualities—manageable size, familiar faces, a sense of being known. Few of us will ever again know the kind of total community that intermingled place and kin, work and friends—and fewer of us want to. Far more helpful is to find out where it is that we do feel community *today*, and to set about enhancing that feeling without getting hung up on obsolete notions of what a community should be.

Some see the building of community as a job for the government, the best path a political one. There is much that the government can do to create a climate more conducive to community. The government, for example, could evaluate all social and political programs according to a "community index," one that would judge programs purely in terms of their effect on human intercourse, whether they brought people together, or drove them apart. A community index should not be the only one, but should weigh more heavily than it does now. Urban renewal, for example, might get a zero for putting high-rises and freeways above neighborhoods, people, and community. Local laws that prevent unrelated groups of people from living together would rank at the bottom of a community index.

Some trends in America are encouraging, such as the growing "community based" orientation in mental health, corrections, and education. Most of what's going on in the ecology movement is an encouragement to community and ranks

high on the community index. Anything that helps develop alternatives to cars has to be good.

Still, neither political reform nor revolution can bring about the kind of community I'm concerned about, the kind where people really know each other. The job of government is to mediate among millions of people. This gives it a set of priorities in which community building ranks low, and should. Feeding the hungry must come first, then redistributing income, and keeping us from killing each other.

Take the issue of busing. From a political standpoint the crosstown busing of schoolchildren may be a necessary tool for integration and social justice. From the standpoint of community, busing is a disaster, another wrecker of our neighborhoods. In this case, as in so many, political priorities are at variance with those of community. Building a sense of community will always be the work of those who want it. The government at times may be able to lend a hand, but only a hand.

An ideal community would be like a good family: the group from which one can't be expelled. Or like Robert Frost's definition of home—the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. But that's ideal, and few of us will ever build such a community.

I've defined my attainable community as "the place where it's safe to be known." This has meaning for me, because trusting people to see me is so hard, and it feels so good when I do. It feels like community. And that kind of community can be built in a range of settings, from a commune to a bar or a church.

The elements that strike me as especially important for building a community include manageable size, a willingness to be exclusive, acceptance of oppression, and at least some modicum of commitment.

Size is of the essence. Manageable numbers are basic to any group of people hoping to get close. Trust can be built only among familiar faces.

The need to exclude is one of the harshest realities with which would-be community builders must cope. It grates against every humanistic instinct to openness, hospitality, and tolerance. But there's no alternative path to a truly intimate community.

I'm not saying that it's necessary or

even good to exclude *all* outsiders. A community with completely stable membership would get dull very quickly. But the crucial point for an intimate community is that it controls its own access, chooses new members, and is not just like a hotel.



There is an inescapable relationship between brotherhood and oppression. Any group setting out to build community must anticipate this relationship and deal with it. Being in community doesn't make you more free; it takes away some of your freedom in exchange for the warmth of membership. Ignoring or denying that trade-off just makes it harder to confront.

To deny the relationship between community and conformity, to call them two different things, is to make community that much more difficult to achieve. To be in community requires the sacrifice of at least part of your individuality. To belong to a group you must accept the group's will at least sometimes, like it or not. That's as true at Esalen as it is in Levittown. For me and for anyone seeking community, it then becomes a question of how much autonomy to trade in. Is the community I want Synanon or a radio talk show?

A community simply cannot be built from people crouched and ready to take off, like footracers awaiting the crack of a gun. Commitment is basic, but fear of commitment may be the biggest barrier to the rediscovery of community, including marriage.

When I say "commitment," I don't mean a signature in blood, or even a long term contract. What I do mean is a willingness to stay through friction, to work on problems when they occur, to be a little stuck with each other. That may not be "commitment" according to Webster, but it's more than many of today's communities, even today's marriages, enjoy.

Without confusing temporary and committed community, some opt for the former. That's the approach of Richard Sennet, a young sociologist, who says that his kind of community is best found in the disorder of a city. "In the adult society I envision," writes Sennet, "there would be no expectation of human love, no community of affection, warm and comforting, laid down for the society as a whole. Human bonds would be fragmented and limited to specific, individual

encounters."

That's an honest vision of a society in which I wouldn't want to live, one in which disposability would infect every relationship. But it's an alternative not masquerading as anything other than a community of transients. Confusion of that alternative, of disposable communities, with ones based on commitment is what creates problems.



I began with a fairly conventional perspective on how we became such a lonely people—that mass society dehumanized and cut us off from each other—but believed that with imagination and new approaches we might defeat these influences and restore our sense of community.

The more I studied the issue and tried to build a community for myself, the less I found that to be the case. The villain whose trail I kept stalking turned out really to be ourselves (myself); our (my) ambivalence about community; our wish (my wish) not to get too close, thwarting a real hunger to join together.

Something I've realized only slowly is that seeking "community" in the abstract dooms the search. Community is people. I find community only when I find other people. I'm open to a group only when I'm open to its members. When I start looking for some mystical "community," I usually miss the people.

The problem of community, which sociologist Robert Nisbet calls "the single most impressive fact in the twentieth century in Western society," is relatively modern. For most of man's history, group life was a given, and grew naturally out of the ways we were forced to be with each other—to live, work, wash clothes, and die.

This is no longer true. We have less and less necessity to be together and fewer ways of knowing each other, while our need for community remains constant. So we're forced back on the only immutable reason for joining hands: the human need for company. Without place, cause, common work, or religion, most of us must make that humiliating admission: I can't live alone.

Once someone—once I—can take the risk, break the ice, and say how I really feel, it's amazing how many others turn out just to have been waiting their turn. Then the community begins.