

The Community of Renewal; Renewal of the Community

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In the 1960's musical, *CARNIVAL*, the heroine sings a plaintive little song about her home town. She sings these words:

I came from the town of Mira,
beyond the bridges of Saint Claire
I guess you've never heard of Mira,
It's very small but still its there.
They have the very greenest trees
and skies as bright as flame.
But what I liked the best in Mira,
is ev'rybody knew my name.
Can you imagine that?
Can you imagine that?
Ev'rybody knew my name.

More than a quarter century later, one of the most popular programs on prime-time television would be a situation comedy set in a bar at the foot of Beacon Hill in Boston, where, according to the theme song, "Everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came."

Each of these expressions of popular culture reflects a paradox with which we have lived throughout this century. On the one hand, we have embraced a life-style characterized by ever larger, ever more impersonal institutions in which individuals have tended to become increasingly isolated, disconnected and anonymous. We have moved from farms to towns, to cities, to megacities. We have consolidated schools from small and intimate institutions to large and impersonal institutions. We have merged small businesses into larger and larger and larger corporations. Even our churches have grown from very small and intimate to larger, more corporate, and in some instances, into megachurches. All around us, the world has grown large and impersonal and beyond human scale.

We have welcomed and embraced the advantages which have come from these developments--the freedom, the opportunities, the economies of scale which are a consequence of the kind of organizational development which has characterized this century. At the same time, our sense of personal involvement in and responsibility for the commonweal, for the corporate structures upon which society rests has become

attenuated, as we have sought to serve our private, individual needs in a world where nobody knows our names.

In the midst of this increasingly impersonal world, we find ourselves haunted by a memory, buried deep in our consciousness, a memory of another time, another place, of a town, a work place, a church, a school where everybody knew our names, of a community where we were known and welcomed and everyone was glad we came. It doesn't matter that many of us may never really have experienced that kind of community. As life grows more and more impersonal and we feel ourselves slipping deeper into anonymity, many of us experience a longing for that other world we believe once existed. And the result is that we have sometimes developed uncritical attitudes about the nature of community.

It is part of the current conventional wisdom to hold that the source of the present malaise in our national life (however you may wish to define that malaise) is to be found in the fact that we have developed an extreme individualism which has proved corrosive of any vital or valid sense of community. This individualism finds expression in a kind of pervasive selfishness which rewards those whose lives are spent in seeking the main chance, while the sense of a commonweal, of a larger community to which we belong and for which we are responsible becomes ever more tenuous. Indeed, there is a social and political movement abroad in the land called communitarianism, which is committed to reversing this trend and placing community values at the center of our lives once again.

I must confess to you that whenever I hear these fashionable but uncritical paeans to the virtues of community, my teeth begin to itch. I understand the invidious consequences which flow from a rampant individualism which neither understands, values or respects the larger community in which all individuals are rooted. It is this kind of individualism which finds expression in a determination to exploit the resources of the planet for immediate gain without thought to long-term consequences. It is this kind of individualism which leads some people to a kind of social darwinism denying any responsibility for or to the weak and the despoiled in our social system. It is this kind of individualism that fuels the rampant consumerism which undercuts and threatens the very existence of most voluntary institutions. But it is also true that community is not an automatic or unmixed blessing. Let me tell you a story to illustrate my point.

When I was very new in this business, I had occasion to serve as minister to a small church in south-western Ohio. It was a congregation with a long and proud history, which had fallen on hard times. In its hay-day, the church had been a major institution in a small town which had been the focus of a prosperous agricultural area. Around the turn of the century, the congregation had build in the center of town a brick, gothic building consisting of a sanctuary which would seat several hundred, an adjoining social-hall which doubled as church school class rooms, or as back-up seating space when needed, an ample kitchen, a second-story set of class rooms, and a large bell-tower complete with bell.

It was never clear to me whether all this space had been built to meet the actual need of the congregation at the time of construction, or in response to some grandiose dream which never came true. What was unmistakably clear was that by the time I--as a junior in college--became minister of the church in 1957, the congregation had dwindled to a total of twenty elderly people, and the turn of the century building betrayed the consequences of decades of neglect and penury. Where the roof had leaked over the years, the plaster bubbled and flaked and drifted down from the great vaulted ceiling. The walls were stained with the dust and grime of years; the carpet was tattered and torn. The stained glass windows were patched where ancient breaks had occurred, and some of the colors had bleached out into clear glass.

All in all, the building presented a sad and depressing picture. But even more depressing was the fact that with one or two exceptions the twenty members who comprised the remnant of that congregation cordially disliked each other. And they made that dislike visible each Sunday morning when they came into the building for the service. They spread out over that vast space so that no two of them sat next to each other, or even in the same pew. Each year, at the time of the annual meeting, there were contested elections, as members formed temporary factions in an effort to keep one or another of them from being elected out of turn to the position of moderator of the congregation.

They were like scorpions in a bottle; they did not like each other; they did not trust each other; they could not escape each other. And, out of perversity, or generosity--I never knew which--they acted quickly, whenever a stranger wandered in, to make certain that no new actors would enter the drama. Following the service, they would descend on any new-comer and explain in great detail what a bunch of scoundrels the previous ministers had been, and how desperate was the current plight of the church as a result, and how bleak was the future of the institution. They were expert at what they did. Few people ever came back for a second visit.

The curious thing was that away from each other, outside this particular community, most of these people were kind, generous, interesting people. In other situations, they were valued and respected participants in the life of the town. For the most part, they were not unpleasant or especially difficult. But when they came together in that community, something demonic happened to them. They became absorbed in the onerous task of carrying the legacy of this moribund church.

Unlike many of their predecessors, they had waited too long and no longer felt free just to walk away from their institutional burden. Nor were they able to envision any future for it. They were trapped together in this community with no way out but death--their own or that of the church. Indeed, they alternated between anger--at those who had walked away and left this thing on their hands--and fear--that just enough people would join the community to keep it alive and thus bind them even tighter to their unpleasant burden.

Because their energies were so absorbed in this complex of internal relationships, the members of that congregation were never able to embrace any other possibilities. The world outside remained irrelevant to them as a group. They could not reach out; they

could not see any other possibilities. They were a remnant community created by a common identity, compounded of a shared experience of lost dreams and failed hopes. What they shared was a heritage of past glories and frustrated promises. What they shared was a legacy of defeat. They could not give up the past without giving up their identity; they had no reason to hope for a future. When Sartre suggested that "hell is other people," he might have used this community as an example.

Nor, of course, is this little church the only example of demonic community. If you wish to see community carried to its demonic extreme, you need only consider the former Yugoslavia, where ethnic groups which had lived side by side for half a century or more, sharing apartment buildings, schools, other institutions, frequently inter-marrying have suddenly permitted the ethnic community to submerge individual identities and relationships and to over-ride all other loyalties. The result, as you know is murder and mayhem beyond anything we have seen in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

The point to all of this is to suggest that it is not enough to assume that community is an unmitigated good. One must ask about the nature and the focus, the scope and the purpose of the community. My experience leads me to believe that communities which are narrowly focused, which serve the past, which seek to subsume the individual into a rigid, collective identity can be profoundly dangerous, destructive forces in human history. The creative community is one which honors the integrity of the individual, which accepts people as they are, values the past out of which they have come, but which finds its focus in the future, in the unrealized possibilities, in the richness which results from honoring diversity. In short, the creative community is a community of renewal, open to the ever present possibility of transformation.

That, my friends, is what this religious community--at its best--is all about. We do not ask people to submerge their individualism into a common identity, or a finished history, or a received faith. Rather, we offer the opportunity for men and women to weave their lives together into a rich and vibrant fabric in which our individual differences and our peculiar visions and our idiosyncratic qualities enhance and enrich each other, making our relationships symbiotic, building out of what each of us brings an institution, a community which is greater than the sum of its parts. This is a community which seeks to honor each individual, to respect the gifts which each brings, to provide an arena in which those gifts may be shared and common tasks may be undertaken, and to remind us of the ever larger circles of community to which we owe loyalty and responsibility.

Such a community, of course, does not come into being or survive by accident. A creative community is built upon several fundamental assumptions. The first is that we accept people as they are; the second is that we see them as they might be; the third is that we support each other on the journey from what we are to what we shall be; and the fourth is that the symbol of community is, for us, not a closed circle, but a web.

All of us, in this congregation are people in process. We are not yet complete; life is not yet finished with us. As we wrestle with our particular joys and sorrows, our unique gifts

and failings, our personal achievements and defeats, our defining strengths and limitations each of us stands always on the brink of something new, some further evolution, some unexpected transformation. In such a community, every day is an invitation to explore our connections to a wider world than we have known.

This community exists to encourage us and to support us and to sustain us as we move through the sometimes painful, always somewhat scary adventure that moves us from what we are to what we shall be. This community exists to mirror to each of us a vision of what we might become, to help us along the journey, to celebrate our accomplishments and to be there when we over-reach and are disappointed in our dreams. This community exists to encourage us try again, to remain open to the possible, to escape the trap of isolation, to embrace an always uncertain future.

In order for that to happen, of course, the community as a whole must be willing to change, must keep itself open to the possibility of renewal and transformation. In a creative community, in which the individual is not subsumed but is honored and celebrated, each person who enters into the community represents a challenge and an opportunity. Each new person, each transformed member requires that we redraw the boundaries of the community, that we restate the definition of the community. Each individual brings special gifts, special needs, untried dreams and a unique history. Each individual offers the possibility of changed patterns of relationship within group. To the degree that this congregation is a creative community, it must remain a community in process. It is never complete; life is not yet finished with this congregation; always we stand on the brink of something new, some further evolution, some unexpected transformation, some new connection. Each individual who chooses to weave his or her life into the fabric of this congregation offers a mutual opportunity for renewal and transformation.

A religious community, at its best, is one of those growing edges within the larger community of the world. It is a place where novelty is welcomed, where different gifts are honored, where the unconventional is an invitation to explore, where the unexpected may conceal the holy. The religious community is a place where we can know each other and be known, not only in terms of who we have been and what we have done, but in terms of what we might become and what we might yet do.

To sustain a community in which people may be renewed and transformed, in which people are welcomed as agents of renewal and transformation, we need to maintain a balance between respect for the individual and loyalty to the institution, an understanding of the past out of which we have come and an openness to the future which lures us on, a respectful attention to the voice of dissent, and a refusal to be immobilized in the present by doubts and fears.

It is unlikely that most of us will ever find our way back to Mira to that little town where "they have the very greenest trees and skies are bright as flame," a place "where everybody knows my name." As the heroine comments later in her song, "I'm very far from Mira now, and there's no turning back." A community based on nostalgia, a

community dedicated to the dream of recreating a world that once was and is no more, is almost certain to prove demonic. But a community of renewal, a place where we open ourselves to renewal and transformation, where we can discover our true names, experience who we really are and find encouragement to become what we are called to be, that is a very special place, a very sacred place, a very holy place.

In such a place, we can begin to discover how to live with meaning and hope in a world grown large and complex, how to build a community which honors the integrity of the individual, which manages to be open to the future without being threatened by divergent views of that future, which invites diversity but is not immobilized by dissent, which reaches out beyond its own boundaries, which trusts the future and the ability of women and men to grow beyond what they have been and what they have known.

That is the mission of this congregation, this community of transformation and renewal. We are called to build and sustain healthy, creative community, a place where the past is celebrated, but the future may be tried, a place where they are always glad we came, where they make glad welcome to the gifts we bring, where we are encouraged to be more than we knew we could be. In the process, the community itself is renewed, grows and changes and becomes more than the founders dreamed. In this kind of community of continuing transformation and renewal, if we are alert and attentive we may, from time to time, feel the presence of the holy moving among us and within in our lives.