



A Framework for Considering Healthy Communities

– by Carolyn Griffeth

...For a community to be truly dynamic, not only does it need to find balance in reaching **inwardly** toward God, and **outwardly** toward the world...But also I would suggest that there is a third pole that must be equally developed...which could be called **togetherness pole**...We must also have a disciplined practice of reaching towards each other.

Also, we need to skillfully use our togetherness to support our reaching inwardly toward God, and outwardly toward the world. The image I have is a thriving tree with three distinct aspects; roots, trunk, and fruit-filled branches. Which stand respectively for spiritual rootedness, communal bondedness, and political practice.

Roots

In this model, the trees roots, whose depth must support the whole, symbolize rootedness in God, the ground of being, and spirit of life that is made manifest in Creation. The roots of the tree represent each individual pursuing both God and personal wholeness, which provides rootedness for the community as a whole.

In the words of JV: **each of us should deepen our own personal conscience and mystical life. It is precisely here that the weakness and strength of community lie.**

An insight I have recently gained is that individuals must cultivate all Four aspects of human wholeness for community to be properly rooted: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. This is simply because the spirit dwells within the human person, where mind, body, and heart converge. Heart meaning the emotional center and place of connection with others. As we invite the spirit of love to more fully dwell in us, through spiritual practice...spirit simultaneously seeks to flow through us through our free and formed mind, body, and heart.

Practices that help with Spiritual rootedness:

For spiritual deepening each community member should be seriously engaged in some spiritual tradition, which includes prayer, or meditation, and perhaps spiritual direction. Spiritual rootedness also comes from studying sacred writing, and the lives of the saints, named and unnamed that have not only gone before us, but also live amongst us. It is sensible to seek out such a person, whose life you find worth immolating, and to ask them for spiritual consul. Fasting.

Deepening our rootedness with the earth by spending time in nature and committing ourselves to stewardship of a particular piece of earth is also spiritually rooting.

Mental formation:

might include engaging in social analysis, through reading, Round Tables. Mental formation might also mean studying forms of oppression, or means of liberation....permaculture, bible study

Physical development

How often have I seen someone railing against the exploitive practices of global capitalism, while yet addicted to chocolate, coke, and coffee. Physical development might include ridding oneself of our bodily addictions to the toxic foods and drugs capitalism has pushed upon us since childhood, and choosing instead to be addiction free, healthy, and strong.

Physical development also means personally embracing manual labor according to one's ability. This means striving to earn a living by the sweat of one's own brow, rather than someone else's. This is an essential practice for people living in the global north. Truly I believe there will be no revolution without it.

Emotional development

Possibly the area which is least understood and most often neglected. Ched Meyers writes: **I have become convinced that community is doomed without an accompanying therapeutic process undertaken by each member.**

Ched also quotes Richard Rohr, who argues that Quote: **community simply cannot bear the overwhelming intrapsychic and interpersonal needs that people bring to it because of the epidemic dysfunction and breakdown in postindustrial family life.**

I imagine we all agree with Richard Rohrs analysis of the problems with postindustrial family life. Still it is hard to talk about how the hurt of growing up in this alienating context lives in each of us. This hurt takes the form of not only internalized capitalism, but also internalized sexism, racism, ageism, and countless other isms that have left us all feeling pretty bad about ourselves.

Examples: Co-counseling, 12 step programs, men's groups, other types of therapeutic support groups, vision quests

As we work on the physical, mental, and emotional level, we free ourselves up to follow the promptings of the Spirit, and to love and forgive one another as wouldn't otherwise be possible.

The Trunk: Moving to the togetherness part of community

The trunk of the tree represents our relationships with one another in community or our communal bondedness. The strength of the trunk is found foremost in the health of each individual which rest primarily on each individual's rootedness in God, pursuit of physical and emotional health, and mental formation..

In other words, the strength of communal bondedness, the trunk, rest largely on each member's spiritual rootedness, represented by the depth of the tree's roots. Community is built only secondarily through communal practices of connection such as check-ins, good communication, reconciliation, *and other practices of embracing one another.*

For this reason, individuals that are relatively emotionally healthy and spiritually centered can create and maintain strong connection with one another with relative ease and little community building. On the other hand, all efforts toward community building are undermined when individuals are carrying deep hurts and confusions. In the words of Peter Maurin the French Peasant who along with DD founded the CW, "Everything begins with oneself." This is particularly true when it comes to building a healthy community—so much rests on each individual taking responsibility

for their personal wellbeing. This emphasis on taking personal responsibility for transforming the world beginning with oneself is advocated by the Personalist Philosophical tradition, which inspired Peter Maurin.

On the other hand, Peter Maurin and the Personalist Philosophers also emphasized that no one should have to go it alone. The structures of “society,” beginning with our shared life in community, should be aimed at fostering the wholeness and holiness of each individual. In the words of Peter Maurin, “We should create culture where it is easier to be good.”

In the Catholic Worker human goodness and communal bondedness is fostered by emphasizing cooperation over competition, self-giving over self-advancement, inclusion over exclusion, and connection over isolation. This emphasis is not only philosophical but also structurally made manifest in our practice of radical economics, mutual aid, shared labor, communal meals, consensus decision making and living closely together. In all these ways we begin to form ourselves into a people and into a new way of being. **Some examples include:**

Soccer, morning prayer, women’s gathering, Co-counseling, book discussions, celebrations, making music, dancing, communal covenant, encouragements and discouragements, How are you thriving in community check in. HUGs, touch.

Human goodness, or growth toward wholeness, is best fostered when work on the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental levels is structured into our life as a community. Some activities like celebrations can include a physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual element. These practices may be most bonding of all. Within community, examples of work on Emotional level include: Emotional work is short checkins before meetings, and longer checkins, women’s and mens support groups. As wonderful as such practices are, true communal bondedness can not be achieved solely by outward acts...On the deepest level it requires that we truly embrace of one another in all our brokenness.

More on building community

It has been said that the whole of the Christian message can be summarized in the parable of the prodigal son. In the parable, the prodigal son rejects his Father’s home, gets lost in the ways of the world, and eventually returns home totally beaten down and hoping to be one of his father’s servants. How surprised the son must be when his father runs out to greet him and embrace him in his loving arms!

The less appreciated meaning of this parable is that each of our return home is not complete until we too become like the Father (God) and fully embracing others on their return home. Every person comes into community seeking a home where she might be known and embraced for who she is. We want our gifts to be recognized and encouraged. And We want to belong to a people.

This desire for finding a place of love, acceptance, and belonging is as true for Catholic Workers, as it is for the individuals struggling with homelessness, who we welcome into our homes, or the individuals with developmental disabilities that the community of La Arch embraces.

From my perspective, this is the central project of community: to fully embrace each individual, as a means of returning him to the reality that he is loved. And as a means of wrestling with the hatred and hurt that lies in ourselves. This is why Jean Vanier says: **The Enemy in Community reveals the Enemy in ourselves.** Our communal Enemies reveal to us the way we have been made to feel untrusting of life, or bad about ourselves . . .

Because of the hurt and unmet needs we all bring into community. We must be very deliberate about making sure our communities are places of **embrace and healing**, rather than **hurt and further wounding** for all those that enter..

What are some concrete practices that help communities move in the healing direction?

I would like to share, 10 such practices that I believe can help build a nurturing and growth-oriented community culture. These are sorta my Beatitudes of community living, ideals we can strive for within the messiness and limitations of community life.

1. First everyone should commit oneself to do one's own emotional, physical, mental and spiritual work. (the health of our communities begins with oneself)
2. Commit ourselves to nourishing a healthy relationship with everyone in community. There is a real violence to **proximity without intimacy**. People expect and deserve to be known and loved, just like every child in a household. (This doesn't mean going out for coffee once a week with everyone, but it does mean clearing up anything that prevents you from fully caring for someone.)
- 2b. A corollary to this is the commitment to Never withdraw from any relationship.(unless abusive). Use mediators if necessary.
3. Speak the truth in love: Love demands that we challenge one another. Refusing to challenge someone is a way of failing to fully love someone. If you are upset, wait to speak until you can speak the truth in love.
4. Commitment to no negative speech about any one in community. Nothing increases safety more than this practice. (You can relay events, but leave out your interpretation.)
5. Learn Nonviolent communication which teaches us to directly communicate our needs, and not speak in ways the judge and alienate others.
6. Admit mistakes and ask for forgiveness even when your error hasn't been noticed. This demonstrates that your community is one of acceptance and forgiveness
7. Seek reconciliation in a conflict by first speaking to that person directly. Try first taking full responsibility for the way you have failed in the situation.
8. Affirm and encourage. Point out each others abundant giftedness. No one gets enough words of affirmation and appreciation.
9. Create sharing times where individuals share what dreams and goals they are working on (related or unrelated to community projects) and receive enthusiastic support and interest.
10. No the ways others are marginalized. Chances are most everyone in our communities feels left out or marginalized in some way...maybe because they are the only parent, maybe they are single and others are coupled, maybe they are of a different racial or class background, or have chronic illness or other unique challenges. Resist the temptation to compare these experiences of marginalization, and instead simply seek to fully include everyone. Resist ageism by cultivating significant relationships with folks much older than you, much younger than you and with children.

From my discussions with CWers coming from several different communities the greatest obstacle is a lack of commitment to the community and to one another. Lack of long term commitment prevents us from taking greater risks in terms of practicing radical economics, or engaging in direct action. A lack of commitment to one another can also leave us feeling still somewhat disconnected and alone even while living together.

The Branches

The branches of the tree are the ways a community seeks to reach out to the world, through hospitality, service, earth care, peacemaking, direct action etc. We can only undertake this challenging work in the spirit of love, if we have grown into a new way of being through inner-work, and communal discipline.

This is why in the words of Martin Luther King Jr, "To leave community is to leave resistance." Scripture tells us that a tree will be judged by the fruit it bears. Truly it is by reaching out to touch the world; that the fruit of the spirit, having grown in heart of community, can be shared. Through these fruits new seeds are planted in the hearts and imaginations of others.

In the words of Jean Vanier: **Community must exist for an aim outside itself. It is only as great as the gift it offers the world.**

Some examples

Hospitality, Direct Action, Joining groups such as the organization for black struggle, in order to support minority lead movements, rather than simply wishing more minorities would join our movement.

For a community to flourish, the weight of its branches must be adequately balanced by the depth of the roots and strength of the trunk. Like a sapling, a community must grow organically, first root and trunk then little branches. Any lack of order and balance prevents the tree from thriving and community life becomes stifling and oppressive, or dull and irrelevant.

We must resist the desire to simply push forward to produce fruit...acts of service, or projects to change the world, until our communal trunk is strong enough to gracefully bare the weight of it. That said, it is the desire to bare fruit, to touch the lives of others and transform the world, which draws us to community, and bonds us to one another. One could argue that it is the desire to bare fruit that spurs the growth of the tree to begin with.

In order to build a thriving community, I would propose that our communities must not only focus on our outward reaching projects, but also encourage and support each individual in doing work on the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical level. Equally essential is creating structures and practices within community that encourage spiritual rootedness, emotional wholeness and connection with others, mental formation, and physical health. Lastly, communities must struggle together with issues of commitment to one another and to the health and longevity of the community as a whole. Since we have all been acculturated into a culture that highly prizes individualism and individual freedom over rootedness, responsibility, and committed relationships, acts of commitment should be considered in themselves to be significant acts of resistance.

In closing, I should add that each community must find its own means to wholeness and its own unique balance. There are many types of trees, each with its own proportions.

Questions for Discussion

- How would you describe the roots, trunk and branches of the Karen house Community?
- Where do we excel? Are there areas that you would like to strengthen?