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Community

By 1993, after 23 years in Philadelphia, I had sunk deep roots. I was active on numerous nonprofit boards in the Jewish, legal, and civic worlds. My wife and I had lots of acquaintances, mostly through our professional and volunteer activities. We belonged to a synagogue and swim club, and went to parties, theatre, and dance. If someone had asked me then, I probably would have said, “of course I have community.” But I would have been wrong

My lesson in real community began, that year, when I participated in the Essential Experience Workshop. While the “EE” Workshop was a great experience, the real eye opener, for me, was the community I was invited to join when the weekend ended.

In retrospect, I am reminded of an interview with a woman who didn’t realize she was a lesbian until her 40s. Finally having sex with another woman, her reaction was: “So this is what they’ve been talking about!” Before the workshop I – like her – didn’t know what I was missing because, quite simply, I had never experienced it. Becoming a part of the EE community was a true awakening.

Before EE, when my “community” consisted of a series of friendships, each relationship required my continuing attention. In EE, however, I became a part of something bigger than me. Even when I am preoccupied elsewhere, I know the community is there – a home and refuge to which I can always return.

A defining aspect of EE – and, I suspect, most true communities – is its communal, non-authoritarian structure and feel. As members, we are not slotted into an existing hierarchy. Instead, we are invited into brotherhood of like-minded people, working together to create a shared community. Knowing that it belongs to us – and depends on us for its continued vitality – we show up; participate in its activities, traditions, and rituals; and assume leadership roles as needed.

My level of involvement with different EE members varies greatly. By my sense of connection goes beyond the vagaries of individual relationship. Meeting an EE grad for the first time, I presume a common outlook and shared respect, affection, and loyalty that are both general (for the community) and specific (for each member). And I reasonably expect these feelings to be reciprocated.

With EE as my classroom, I have developed a much richer sense of what community is and how powerfully it can shape our lives. I have also come to believe that

meaningful and lasting change – in our lives and in the world – can only occur when we reinforce and magnify our individual efforts through communal involvements.

Creating community is, however, a huge challenge. Why? Because we live in a culture where individualism is rampant. “Do you own thing,” “make your dream happen,” “you can do anything, if you by just try harder” – these ideas have become iconic: Constantly repeated, seldom examined, and deeply influential in our lives. Consumed with building individual careers, we have, in the last 60 years, massively withdrawn from our churches, fraternal organizations, and unions – a process that Robert Putnam painstakingly documents in Bowling Alone.

This unraveling of our communal ways is a radical departure from habits of living that have endured for countless millennia. As hunter/gatherers, community was the taken-for-granted context in which we lived for 99.9% of our 6 million or so years as a distinct species. And even just 150 years ago, most people still lived their lives in a single location, sharing a common culture with unchanging group of people.

This shift seems to have “just happened” – with little or no awareness on our part. The result? We tend to see it as an unavoidable byproduct of the technological advances of the last 60 years. But this is not true. These changes are, in reality, the result of historical forces that, while powerful and enduring, are by not means foreordained. And understanding why this has happened is critically important, lest we slip into passive acceptance of this “inevitable” shift in our way of living.

Our readiness to accept these changes as inevitable and irreversible arises out of our habit of ignoring the crucial role that values play in our history. To understand this point, recall the “futurists” of the 1950s. These experts – a staple of secondary education in that era – foresaw life-altering technological breakthroughs in the ensuing decades and confidently predicted that, by the year 2000, three-day workweeks would be the norm.

So why is it that these experts, so prescient in their technological predictions, were so wildly off base in predicting their social consequences? Because they failed to understand that – in a culture where competition, dominance and control are the predominant values – these new technologies would be used to compete better, faster, and harder.

What, then, are the values-based historical factors with which we need to deal? Jared Diamond and others points out that, about 15,000 years ago, we humans domesticated plants and animals. This momentous event made settled communities feasible and also allowed one group – controlling the food supply – to dominate others. And so began a species-altering shift toward authoritarian systems that, ever since, have extended and deepened their hold on the ways in which we live.

Viewed in this context, there is nothing remarkable about the process that has unfolded over the last 60 years. Systems, by their very nature, tend to perpetuate themselves. And so, for countless centuries, new technologies have been reflexively co-opted by the beneficiaries of this authoritarian trend – to expand and deepen their power.

Very predictably, then, the massive technology advances of the last half-century have been deployed in ways that further entrench the status quo systems that dominate our culture. And this process has inexorably led to a weakening of our communal ways of living. Why? Because challenges to entrenched systems are much more likely to occur when people organize, and vibrant communal organizations are the fertile ground out of which these transformative social movements typically arise. So promoting rootlessness through the cult of individualism and a head-long pursuit of power and wealth – and, then, using our new technologies to intensify that pursuit – are utterly expectable outcomes.

Indeed, the only really novel aspect of the last 60 years – and this is no small thing – is rapidity of the change process. With life-altering technologies being developed with mind boggling rapidity – jet travel, television, instant global communication, computer-based information management – seismic shifts in the way we live are now measured in years and decades, and not centuries and millennia.

There are important lessons to be drawn from all of this. The first is positive. Since the values that predominate in our culture are the product of historical forces, they can be undone. Fundamental change is possible.

But we also need to recognize the depth of the challenge. Glib and easy answers do not exist for a problem that is 15,000 years in the making. We need to do what we can – now, in our time – and hope that others will build on what we leave behind.

So what do we need to do? Since change is much more likely to happen when we join our efforts with others, one key piece of the work is to create new – and newly re-vitalized – communal organizations. Living in and through these more cooperative models of living, we will be better able to: Deepen our understanding of the challenges we face; hone our ability to craft more creative and effective change strategies; and magnify our potential impact, by creating the ground out of which larger social and political movements can emerge.

A final thought: Business is the primary driver of the values that predominate in our culture. The majority of our days, and the great bulk of our most productive hours, are devoted work and career. For that reason, the idea of focusing on the creation of values-based, communal business models seems particularly compelling. As described at greater length in Reflection 15, we need to demonstrate that you can be radically decent and still earn a good living; that our workplace can be an extension of our deepest values, and not an unfortunate exception at the center of our lives.