

Deepening Community

This morning, I want to encourage you to think about deepening the communities in which you are involved. These might include

Your family (immediate and extended)

Your Neighborhood

Community social groups and sports teams you belong to

Community organization in which you volunteer around a cause.

And of course, faith communities, — this congregation

More on a couple of those later, but first I want to describe some qualities of community: Much of what I will say is taken from Paul Born's book, 'Deepening Community'

There are dysfunctional forms of community:

Shallow community, based on selfish or even just lazy or bewildered individualism. An attempt - conscious or not - to deny our desire for deeper community. a may be a choice not to make the effort involved in deepening community, or a choice to live with little commitment.

Fear based community in which people derive their sense of belonging from anxiety or hatred. Fear can bind us together like nothing else. When we are afraid together, we make sense of what is going on around us by creating an us-versus-them reality. This can heighten our sense of threat and as our perception of threat increases, our solidarity grows and our commitment against the other is increased.

We are only too aware of how this can create terrorist groups, groups based on bigotry or homophobia and neighbourhood gangs. Unfortunately, some of these would indeed be "deep communities", but dysfunctional in their impact on our lives and the world.

Those same fears and anxieties that can create fear-base communities, can also lead to healthy community building. Environmental and economic worries can promote reaching out in a way that leads to rediscovering ourselves and one another, finding purpose, belonging, security and fulfillment.

"When asked, "What's the most important thing people can do to make a difference in the world?"

Paul Born replies: "That's simple; Bring chicken soup to your neighbour" . . .

But remember, I said the answer is simple, but the act of bringing soup . . .well, that take work"

It requires that you know your neighbour.

It requires that you know they are not vegetarian and like soup.

It requires that you know them well enough and communicate regularly enough to know they are sick.

Once you know they are sick, you must feel compelled to want to help and

make this a priority among the many calls on your time and energy.

Your neighbour must know you well enough to feel comfortable in receiving your help.

And you must have enough of a relationship to know what they prefer when they are sick, whether it is chicken soup, *pho chana masala* or ice cream.

It takes a lot of work to know your neighbour.

So why bother?

The benefits of community:

Community and belonging **shape our identity more broadly** - when we have community in our lives, we can broaden the person we see ourselves to be. Belonging can shape our identity. It can determine whether we adopt healthy or unhealthy behaviours

Community **builds the conditions for mutual aid and prosperity**. Working together we can do so much more. For this reason, many people have joined credit unions or cooperatives or become members of labor unions.

We can be **smarter and more effective in community**.

John Ott, coauthor of *"The power of Collective Wisdom: And the Trap of Collective Folly."* stated: When human beings gather in groups, a depth of awareness and insight, a transcendent knowing, becomes available to us that, if accessed, can lead to a profound action. We call this transcendent knowing "collective wisdom." This knowing is not of the mind alone. When this knowing and sense of right action emerges, it does so from deep within the individual participants, from within the collective awareness of the group, and from within the larger field that hold the group. - - it is the hope for our future in these chaotic times.

Communities (groups) have the potential to be sources of extraordinary creative power, incubators of innovative ideas, and instruments of social healing.

This is consistent with Darwin's thinking later in his life that survival of the fittest also means survival of the most cooperative.

Community **improves our health and overall well-being**.

Dean Ornish's work on reversing heart disease through lifestyle changes — exercise, a low-fat vegetarian diet, and meditation and yoga for stress release — has transformed the approach to heart disease. In addition to these three changes, Ornish observed that patients with heart disease who had a greater number of significant relationships in their lives lived longer than those who did not. After extensive research he wrote, "Love and Survival: The scientific basis for the healing power of Intimacy." People who answered no to questions about whether they had a friend who could lend them money in a difficult spot, drive them to a hospital, or care for them at home if needed had a three-to-five-times greater risk of disease and premature death from all causes.

Emile Durkheim, renowned sociologist in his monograph "Suicide: a study in

sociology” first published in **1897**, found that people who were well integrated into group life, and those who were married, were far less likely to commit suicide.

Breast cancer survivors who engaged in a support group for a year lived on average twice as long as those who did not. David Spiegel of Stanford U.

Just six weeks of support for patients with malignant melanoma were enough to boost survival time more than threefold. F.I. Fawzy at UCLA

Sheldon Cohen, Carnegie Mellon U. 276 volunteers made drops containing common-cold virus.

Individuals with only three relationships among friends, family, church, clubs etc were four times as likely to develop a cold compared with those reporting six or more types of relationships.

Roseto —homogeneous Italian - American community in Pennsylvania had a strikingly low mortality rate from heart attacks compared with people in two adjacent communities. Roseto was settled by Italian immigrants who had strong family ties and cohesive community relationships. (when these social bonds dissolved to the point where they were similar to those in other towns, the incidence of heart disease rose to match the latter's rates.

between 1979 and 1994, eight large-scale, community-based studies were conducted to examine the relationship between social isolation and death and disease. The results were remarkably consistent. Those who were socially isolated had at least two to five times the risk of premature death from all causes compared with those who had a strong sense of connection and community.

When we develop deep community, we can overcome our loneliness and challenge our fear; we can come together to make sense of the destruction around us; we can reach out together and actually do something about it.

So how do we deepen community?

Paul Popenoe identifies four acts that individually and especially together deepen community:

- Sharing our story
- Enjoying one another by spending time together
- Caring for one another
- Working together to build a better world.

Sharing your story:

An important strategy for deepening the experience of community, whether in faith groups, work groups, social action projects or even your neighbourhood is sharing your story.

Depending on the nature of the group, sharing our stories can range from briefly explaining how we find ourselves in this particular group at this time to elaborating a personal history and review of our wishes, needs and beliefs. Of course, the more

elaborate the history etc., the more we are placing trust in the others in the group and by implication, the more we are offering them a safe place for their story. Deepening community through telling our stories can lead to feeling safer, provide for more solutions to problems, drive better social justice actions and create a base for sharing resources.

Within Unitarianism, one aspect of sharing our stories takes place during our service component called “Joys and Concerns.”

For many members, including myself, having a community and all that that entails is a primary reason for attending and being a member. In addition, the social justice/social action component of our congregation provides for reaching out to the broader community through cooperation with other faith and social action groups and this provides an important vehicle for members to express their values regarding poverty, equality issues, gender diversity and environmental concerns. Involvement in these projects becomes a part of telling our stories and contributes to deepening our sense of community; a classic example of the more you give, the more you receive.

While focusing on telling our story as an act of deepening community, it becomes clear that this act moves us toward the other acts of deepening community noted above. Telling our story leads quite naturally to spending time together, caring for one another and working to build a better world.

Enjoying one another

The joy of being together — The group that plays together, stays together

The joy of collective accomplishment

The joy of collective altruism

The joy of collective lightness of being — many hands make light work

Caring for one another (e.g. the chicken soup story)

Get to know your neighbours

Feel safer

help one another

Do things together for fun

build social capital—reciprocal relationship of caring

St. Thomas Aquinas said we are much more inclined to be hopeful when we have friends to rely on . . .

Working together to build a better world

As we continue to share our stories, and do so with the same players over time, reciprocity and trust grow between us. When we enjoy one another in a community we

have invested in, we become a collective witness to the events around us. We celebrate our achievements and those of our children together.

Reciprocity and trust have a wonderful effect: reaching out to help one another becomes as natural a breathing.

The above three acts of community — give us energy for the fourth act; building a better world together.

Examples include Habitat for humanity, Out of the Cold, Wipe out poverty and the Brock department of social justice research.

We must keep dreaming and sharing our dreams and hopes with one another. And we must keep making these dreams come true by acting on them as community but never against another community.