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The Promise and Paradox of Community

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We human beings have a great need for one another. As described by the West African writer and teacher Malidoma Some, we have "an instinct of community." However, at the end of the 20th century this instinct to be together is materializing as growing fragmentation and separation. We experience increasing ethnic wars, militia groups, specialized interest clubs, and chat rooms. We are using the instinct of community to separate and protect us from one another, rather than creating a global culture of diverse yet interwoven communities. We search for those most like us in order to protect ourselves from the rest of society. Clearly, we cannot get to a future worth inhabiting through these separating paths. Our great task is to rethink our understandings of community so that we can move from the closed protectionism of current forms to an openness and embrace of the planetary community.

It is ironic that in the midst of this proliferation of specialty islands, we live surrounded by communities that know how to connect to others through their diversity, communities that succeed in creating sustainable relationships over long periods of time. These communities are the webs of relationships called ecosystems. Everywhere in nature, communities of diverse individuals live together in ways that support both the individual and the entire system. As they spin these systems into existence, new capabilities and talents emerge from the process of being together. These systems teach that the instinct of community is not peculiar to humans, but is found everywhere in life, from microbes to the most complex species. They also teach that the way in which individuals weave themselves into ecosystems is quite paradoxical. This paradox can be a great teacher to us humans.

Life takes form as individuals that immediately reach out to create systems of relationships. These individuals and systems arise from two seemingly conflicting forces: the absolute need for individual freedom, and the unequivocal need for relationships. In human society, we struggle with the tension between these two forces. But in nature, successful examples of this paradox abound and reveal surprising treasures of insight. It is possible to create resilient and adaptive communities that welcome our diversity as well as our membership.

Life's first imperative is that it must be free to create itself. One biological definition of life is that something is alive if it has the capacity to create itself. Life begins with this primal freedom to create, the capacity for self-determination. An individual creates itself with a boundary that distinguishes it from others. Every individual and every species is a different solution for how to live here. This freedom gives rise to the boundless diversity of the planet.

As an individual makes its way in the world, it exercises its freedom continuously. It is free to decide what to notice, what to invest with meaning. It is free to decide what its reaction will be, whether it will change or not. This freedom is so much a part of life that two Chilean biologists, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela advise that we can never direct a living system, we can only hope to get its attention. Life accepts only partners, not bosses, because self-determination is its very root of being.

Life's second great imperative propels individuals out from themselves to search for community. Life is systems-seeking; there is the need to be in relationship, to be connected to others. Biologist Lynn Margulis notes that *independence* is not a concept that explains the living world. It is only a political concept we've invented. Individuals cannot survive alone. They move out continuously to discover what relationships they require, what relationships are possible.

Evolution progresses from these new relationships, not from the harsh and lonely dynamics of survival of the fittest. Species that decide to ignore relationships, that act in greedy and rapacious ways, simply die off. If we look at the evolutionary record, it is cooperation that increases over time. This cooperation is spawned from a fundamental recognition that one cannot exist without the other, that it is only in relationship that one can be fully one's self. The instinct of community is everywhere in life.

As systems form, the paradox of individualism and connectedness becomes clearer. Individuals are figuring out how to be together in ways that support themselves. Yet these individuals remain astutely aware of their neighbors and local environmental conditions. They do not act from a blinding instinct for self-preservation. Nor do they act as passive recipients of someone else's demands. They are never forced to change by others or the environment. But as they choose to change, the "other" is a major influence on their individual decisions. The community is held in the awareness of the individual as that individual exercises its freedom to respond.

When an individual changes, its neighbors take notice and decide how they will respond. Over time, individuals become so intermeshed in this process of co-evolving that it becomes impossible to distinguish the boundary between self and other, or self and environment. There is a continual exchange of information and energy between all neighbors, and a continuous process of change and adaptation everywhere in the system. And another paradox, it is these individual changes that contribute to the overall health and stability of the entire system.

As a system forms from such co-evolutionary processes, the new system provides a level of stability and protection that was not available when individuals were isolated. And new capacities emerge in individuals and the system overall. Members develop new talents and new abilities as they work out relationships with others. Both individuals and systems grow in skill and complexity. Communities increase the capacity and complexity of life over time.

These complex networks of relationships offer very different possibilities for thinking about self and other. The very idea of boundaries changes profoundly. Rather than being a self-protective wall, boundaries become the place of meeting and exchange. We usually think of these edges as the means to define separateness, defining what's inside and what's outside. But in living systems, boundaries are something quite different. They are the place where new

relationships take form, an important place of exchange and growth as an individual chooses to respond to another. As connections proliferate and the system weaves itself into existence, it becomes difficult to interpret boundaries as defenses, or even as markers of where one individual ends.

Human communities are no different from the rest of life. We form our communities from these same two needs—the need for self-determination and the need for one another. But in modern society, we have difficulty embracing the inherent paradox of these needs. We reach to satisfy one at the expense of the other. Very often the price of belonging to a community is to forfeit one's individual autonomy. Communities form around specific standards, doctrines, traditions. Instead of honoring, as is common among indigenous peoples, the individual as a unique contributor to the capability of the community, instead of recognizing the community's need for diverse gifts, individuals are required to conform, to obey, to serve "the greater good" of the community. Inclusion exacts a high price, that of our individual self-expression. With the loss of personal autonomy, diversity not only disappears, it also becomes a major management problem. The community spends more and more energy on new ways to exert control over individuals through endlessly proliferating policies, standards, and doctrines.

The price that communities pay for this conformity is exhausting and, for its members, it is literally deadly. Life requires the honoring of its two great needs, not one. In seeking to be a community member, we cannot truly abandon our need for self-expression. In the most restrictive communities, our need for freedom creeps in around the edges, or moves us out of the community altogether. We modify our look and clothing, we create cliques that support our particular manner of being, we form splinter groups, we leave the physical community, we disagree over doctrine and create warring schisms. These behaviors demonstrate the unstoppable need for self-creation, even while we crave the support of others.

Particularly in the West, and in response to this too-demanding price of belonging, we move toward isolationism in order to defend our individual freedom. We choose a life lived alone in order for it to be *our* life. We give up the meaningful life that can only be discovered in relationship with others for a meaningless life that at least we think is ours. An African proverb says "Alone, I have seen many marvelous things, none of which are true." What we can see from our pursuit of loneliness is the terrible price exacted for such independence. We end up in deep, vacant places, overwhelmed by loneliness and the emptiness of life.

It seems that whenever we bargain with life and seek to satisfy only one of its two great needs, the result is a quality of true lifelessness. We must live within the paradox; life does not allow us to choose sides. Our communities must support our individual freedom as a means to community health and resiliency. And individuals must acknowledge their neighbors and make choices based on the desire to be in relationship with them as a means to their own health and resiliency.

At first glance, the World Wide Web seems to be a source of new communities. But these groups do not embrace the paradox of community. The great potential of a world connected electronically is being used to create stronger boundaries that keep us isolated from one another. Through the Web, we can seek relationships with others who are exactly like us. We are responding to our instinct of community, but we form highly specialized groups in the image of ourselves, groups that reinforce our separateness from the rest of society. We are not

asked to contribute our uniqueness, only our sameness. We are not asked to encounter, much less celebrate the fact that we need one another's gifts. We can turn-off our computers the moment we're confronted with the discomfort of diversity. Such specialized, self-reflecting networks lead to as much destructiveness of the individual as any dictatorial, doctrine-based organization. In neither type of group are we asked to explore our individualism while being in relationship with others who remain different. In neither type of group are we honoring the paradox of freedom and community.

In human communities, the conditions of freedom and connectedness are kept vibrant by focusing on what's going on in the heart of the community rather than in being fixated on the forms and structures of the community. What called us together? What did we believe was possible together that was not possible alone? What did we hope to bring forth by linking with others? These questions invite in both our individuality and our desire for relationships. If we stay with these questions and don't try to structure relationships through policies and doctrines, we can create communities that thrive in the paradox.

In our observation, clarity at the core of the community about its purpose changes the entire nature of relationships within that community. These communities do not ask people to forfeit their freedom as a condition of belonging. They avoid the magnetic pull of proscribing behaviors and beliefs, they avoid becoming doctrinaire and dictatorial, they stay focused on what they're trying to create together, and diversity flourishes within them. Belonging together is defined by a shared sense of purpose, not by shared beliefs about specific behaviors. The call of that purpose attracts individuals, but does not require them to shed their uniqueness. Staying centered on what the work is together, rather than on single identities, transforms the tension of belonging and individuality into energetic and resilient communities.

In our own work, we have seen these communities in schools, towns, and organizations. They create themselves around a shared intent and some basic principles about how to be together. They do not get into a prescriptive role with one another. They do not found their community on directives, but on desire. They know why they are together, and they have agreed on the conditions of how to be together. And, very importantly, these conditions are kept to a minimum of specificity. One of the most heartening examples we've encountered is a junior high school that operates as a robust community of students, faculty and staff by agreeing that all behaviors and decisions are based on three rules, and just three rules. These are: "Take care of yourself. Take care of each other. Take care of this place." These rules are sufficient to keep them connected and focused, and open enough to allow for diverse and individual responses to any situation. (The fact that this worked so well in a junior high environment should make us all sit up and take notice!) The principal reported that after the building had to be evacuated during a rain storm, he returned last into the building, and was greeted by eight hundred pairs of shoes in the lobby. The children had decided, in that particular circumstance, how to "take care of this place."

We have also seen businesses and large cities rally themselves around a renewed and clear sense of collective purpose. A chemical plant becomes clear that it wants to contribute to the safety of the globe by its safe manufacturing processes; a city determines that it wants to be a place where children can thrive. These are clarifying messages to hold at the core of the community. This clarity helps every individual to exercise his/her freedom to decide how best to contribute to this deeply shared purpose. Diversity and unique gifts become a contribution

rather than an issue of compliance or deviance. Problems of diversity disappear as we focus on contribution to a shared purpose rather than the legislation of correct behavior.

Other problematic behaviors also disappear when a community knows its heart, its purpose for being together. Boundaries between self and other, who's outside and who's inside, get weaker and weaker. The deep interior clarity we share frees us to look for partners who can help us achieve our purpose. We reach out farther and welcome in more diverse voices because we learn that they are helpful contributors to what we are trying to birth. The manager of the chemical plant mentioned above said that he no longer knew where his plant boundaries were, and that it was unimportant to try and define them. Instead, the plant was in more and more relationships with people in the community, the government, suppliers, foreign competitors, churches, and school children—all of whom contributed to the workers' desire to become one of the safest and highest quality plants in the world, a desire which they achieved.

Today, so many of our communities and the institutions that serve them are lost because they lack clarity about why they are together. Few schools know what the community wants of them; the same is true for healthcare, government, the military. We no longer agree on what we want these institutions to provide, because we no longer are members of communities that know why they are together. Most of us don't feel like we are members of a community, we just live or work next to each other. The great missing conversation is about why and how we might be together.

But as lost as we are, there is great hope. Even in our fractured communities, people all the time are in conversations about "Who are we?" and "What matters?" The problem is that these are private conversations occurring around kitchen tables, water coolers, and in restaurants. Seldom do these critical, community-forming questions move into our institutions or the broader community. Yet these *are* the essential questions from which all our communities give birth to the institutions that are meant to serve them—schools, agencies, churches, governments.

When we don't answer these questions as a community, when we have no agreements about why we belong together, the institutions we create to serve us become battle grounds that serve no one. All energy goes into warring agendas, new regulations, stronger protective measures against those we dislike and fear. We look for ourselves in these institutions and can't find anyone we recognize. We grow more demanding and less satisfied. Our institutions dissipate into incoherence and impotence. They do serve us, but only as mirrors that reflect back to us the lack of cohering agreements at the heart of our community. Without these agreements about why we belong together, we can never develop institutions that make any sense at all. In the absence of these agreements, our instinct of community leads us to a community of "me" not a community of "we."

Most public meetings, although originating from a democratic ideal, serve only to increase our separation from one another. Agendas and processes try to honor our differences but end up increasing our distance. They are "public hearings" where nobody is listening and everyone is demanding air time. Communities aren't created from such processes—they are destroyed by the increasing fear and separation that these processes engender. Such public processes also generate the destructive power dynamics that emerge when people feel isolated and unheard.

We don't need more public hearings. We need much more public listening, in processes where we come together and commit to staying together long enough to discover those ideas and issues that are significant to each of us. We don't have to interpret an event or issue the same, but we do have to share a sense that it is significant. In our experience, as soon as people realize that others around them, no matter how different, share this sense of significance, they quickly move into new relationships with one another. They become able to work together, not because they have won anyone over to their view, but because they have connected in a deeper place, a place we identify as the organizing center or heart of the community.

All of us can reach entirely new levels of possibility together, possibilities that are not available from soap box rhetoric. To achieve this, we need to begin these conversations about purpose and shared significance and commit to staying in them. As we stay in the conversation, people start to work together rather than convince each other of who has more of the truth. We *are* capable of creating wonderful and vibrant communities when we discover what dreams of possibility we share. And always, those dreams become much greater than anything that was ever available when we were isolated from each other. The history of most community-organizing and great social change movements can be traced back to such conversations, conversations among friends and strangers who discovered a shared sense of what was important to them.

As we create communities from the cohering center of shared significance, from a mutual belief in why we belong together, we will discover what is already visible everywhere around us in living systems. People's great creativity and diversity, our desire for contribution and relationships, blossom when the heart of our community is clear and beckoning, and when we refrain from cluttering our paths with proscriptions and demands. The future of community is best taught to us by life.



ABOUT MARGARET (MEG) WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley writes, speaks, and teaches how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubled time. She is co-founder and President emerita of The Berkana Institute, an organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a prolific writer. She has authored eight books. Her numerous articles may be downloaded free at her web site: margaretwheatley.com. For more biographical information, see margaretwheatley.com/bio