

Session 1:4 – Community  
Living in the Gift  
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Hey everybody, I'd like to talk in this session about community because wherever I go, at least in the developed world, people tell me that what is missing most from their lives is community. The disintegration of community in America was one of the main drivers of my first book "The Ascent of Humanity." I'd moved back to America from Taiwan hoping to raise my children in the kind of suburbia I'd remembered from childhood, where packs of kids roamed about riding bikes, playing stickball and hopscotch and going off on adventures. I found nothing like that. All the kids were indoors and the neighbors barely knew each other. If you wanted your child to play with other kids you had to arrange a play date. When I was a child we knew everyone on the street and played in their yards. There was always something to do outside and that totally changed when I moved to suburbia in my early thirties. I sent my kids out to play and there was no one for them to play with so they didn't want to be outdoors because life and play had migrated indoors and had migrated out of the public realm into the private realm.

This really distressed me so I'm like "ok, I'll create community." We will have neighborhood get-togethers, a cooking club to share recipes and techniques and all that kind of thing, but nothing really caught on. It didn't seem like a high priority for any of the neighbors to do that and it was the first thing they would sacrifice for their "Thursday evening" or whatever it was and I saw why, because in their busy lives, this cooking club was not helping them meet any of their real needs. It fell into the category of leisure.

I really wanted to understand why this was happening. At first I blamed the migration of life indoors on technology, especially cars, televisions and air conditioning which is a really pernicious one. That level of analysis illuminates something but eventually I came to see this as part of something larger, the disillusion of community. The reason we had no community is that we didn't need each other. Any one of us neighbors could disappear off the face of the earth and it wouldn't materially affect the lives of any of us. Even when we had these get-togethers, in the background, when we got together, was the knowledge that we don't really need each other. The reason is that we were all plugged in to the money economy and met all our needs with money. The kids weren't outside in part because they were all in day care or they were having manufactured experiences in front of a screen, experiences that were produced for profit rather than having real experiences outdoors.

Community is woven from gifts. From the relationships and obligations that are created every time a gift is given and received. You could at least say that gifts are the warp of the fabric of community whereas stories might be the woof.

I already talked about how gifts create ties, obligations and a debt of gratitude. Imagine what it would be like to live in a place where everybody was in debt to everyone else, where everyone's wellbeing depended on the ongoing gifts of the people around them. Just a couple generations ago it was like that; in some places in the world it is still like that. If your roof were leaking, you wouldn't hire roofers and you wouldn't necessarily fix it yourself either, but your neighbors would help out. If the cows got out, you wouldn't have to bring them back yourself, neighbors would help out. Over time, when everyone has done stuff like that for

everyone else, where everyone you see has at one time helped you out, or helped out your mother or your child, then you know that you are not alone. And you have an abiding sense that you need these people and they need you. You know that you belong. You feel at home here. Isn't that what so many of us really are missing today when we talk about community, a feeling of belonging?

One way to understand the disintegration of community is that it has essentially been strip mined. The gift relationships that bound it together have been turned into goods and services that we buy. So for example, if our house burns down we no longer rely on the community to build another one; we source that from an insurance company. In older cultures, singing and music were ubiquitous; now we purchase music instead of making it together. Food preparation was something we did for ourselves and each other; today in America more than half of all meals are prepared in supermarket delis and restaurants outside the home. Wise advice has become "counseling" or "coaching." Sandlot baseball and neighborhood volleyball games have become little league or moved into the realm of TV entertainment. The stories we had about each other have been replaced by celebrity news. Most people know more about Kim Kardashian than they do about their next-door neighbor.

This process of strip mining community; that is essentially what economic growth is, or it's a big part of economic growth that continues to replace more and more of the gift economy with the money economy. That's why, generally speaking, the more "developed" a country is, the more community has broken down. However, even in developed countries, rural people and the poor tend to have more community than the affluent, since they cannot meet all their needs with money so they have to rely on each other.

There is an exception to this rule, because there is another circumstance besides getting through life together that generates community. If a group of people share a strong commitment to an aim beyond themselves, they will experience community also. If you are in a musical band or a sports team, maybe you remember this from when you were younger, you have that feeling; "we need each other." Your excellence helps me too, because it helps what I care about. Your misfortune makes it harder for me because now who is going to be the guitarist or the goalie? We're in it together, that's the feeling. That's the feeling that we are missing, of being "in it together".

One reason why people in the USA are so vulnerable to political polarization is that by identifying themselves in opposition to the other side, they get a bit of that need met, the need to feel "we're in this together." Generally speaking, war provides that function. Today we are nearing the end of the Age of War, in the sense that major nation-states can no longer wage all-out war against each other. This has been true since the 1950s. Old habits die hard, but in a tightly interconnected globalized world, no nation can define itself by its opposition to another (although the American foreign policy establishment, no doubt nostalgic for the Cold War, is trying hard to manufacture new enemies.) Where are we then to source this feeling; "we're all in this together" when community has broken down? Where are we going to source that on a national or global level? We need something to replace it. We need a new shared aim. I propose that that aim should be to repair, regenerate and beautify our hurting planet, to heal its ecological and social trauma. That is something we can all give our gifts toward. That could be a uniting story of the people that tells us why

we're here and what we are part of. Without that I think we're going to see continued intensifying polarization.

Polarization is the biggest problem ultimately that we have in our society, but I can also understand polarization as a symptom of the breakdown of community, of the breakdown of belonging and identity. That's what makes people vulnerable to polarization and to the polarizing stories that we call fascism.

At the present point in history, when we don't need each other to survive anymore in a tangible, local way, a common aim is indispensable if we're going to have authentic community. Having reached this point of development, from a modern context, if we try to artificially create community by putting ourselves in a situation where we do need each other to survive, it kind of feels fake. Like, you can set up your intentional community and go off grid and go low-tech and say, yeah, now we depend on each other, but in the back of your mind you know you could probably rejoin the rest of society and meet your needs with money. You don't REALLY need each other. You are just pretending to. There needs to be a satisfying answer to "why are we doing this?" It has to be more than "getting to know each other" or "having community." That's not community. You can't have community be the motivation for community. There has to be some other aim that you are willing to commit to.

There is another deep human need that, for most people, can only be met in participation with other humans. We are social beings and we need to do things together and those things have to be meaningful. We really need to be a part of something

So building community is more than just about demonetizing life or helping out the neighbors or anything like that. We can definitely enrich life by sourcing our needs through personal relationship to people and to place by living more in gift economy, but this is not all I mean by living in the gift. It also includes being here for each other AND being here together for something more than each other. In other words, We are in this thing together. What is this thing? Maybe we don't know yet. Political polarization and personal judgments obscure its truth that we are in this together. But beneath those, we feel it. We feel this "we are in it together." Maybe in some of us it's just a faint stirring of A KNOWLEDGE. But you can feel the pull of wanting to be in it together.

This is a truth we need to nourish, because through connection to this truth we will experience magnified effectiveness of the practices we're going to explore in this course. This faith, this commitment, this "In it Together" elicits gifts and cooperation and receptivity and generosity. It's the prerequisite for this kind of development into gift and into community.

What are you giving toward? What do you serve? Why are you here? These questions are at the foundation and they are not only personal questions, as in your "life mission," but they take on life, they become animated in reference to the way that other people answer this question. So this is not just some individual thing, this whole thing about "life purpose" and "your mission" as if the separate individual self can have that separate from other people. This is a collective enquiry.

So let make that the seed phrase for this session: "We are in this together." Let that echo in your mind every time you encounter a person in the next day and ongoingly. Find the place

in you where you know this, where it is already true, that “We are in this Together.” You look at somebody and you know on some level this person is an ally. This person is “In it Together” too, even if they are not aware of it.  
So find that truth in yourself and feel it as truth.

Do this where this is easy and where it is hard. Actually do it. Practice this mantra, maybe with a waitress or a checkout person at the store: “We are in this together.” With Donald Trump on TV: “We are in this together.” With your lover, with your neighbor, your rival.

“We are in this together”

“We are in this together”

“We are in this together”

Practice it now mentally, with a feeling for its truth as you visualize these people. Take a minute to do that, visualize someone and know;

“We are in it together.”

And with another one,

“We are in it together”

And another one,

“We are in it together”

This is a practice to carry forth from this session,

“We are in this together”