

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY

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THERE IS, today, a great deal of interest in community. The present issue of *The Way* itself bears witness to the fact. Moreover, it is noteworthy that such interest is not confined to religious circles. The young people who flocked to the music festivals this past summer around the world were at least as much drawn by their desire to share the scene with their fellows as they were by the music itself. It is as if the music were more a vehicle for 'togetherness' than something to be appreciated in its own right. But interest in community is not limited to such special occasions. It is all but impossible to converse for any length of time with students on a college campus without the talk eventually turning to the need for more community and a lament for its lack. And older people are beginning to use the same sort of language. They too, especially in urban areas, are beginning to preach the need for greater community-mindedness if city life is not to disintegrate.

Yet, if there is widespread interest in promoting community, there is also widespread difficulty in saying just what community means and, consequently, in outlining the steps to reach it. Somehow, community is associated with the humanness of our lives, so that its lack is a lack in humanity. But, as with the word 'human' itself, when used normatively, there is much imprecision as to just what it signifies.

It is my intention, therefore, in this paper to try to come to grips with the idea of community itself. Since I am a philosopher by profession, I trust the reader will pardon me if I proceed philosophically, that is, on a certain level of generality, and at some remove from what may be his more immediate concerns. If we are to avoid floundering in our attempts to achieve community, a little light on the nature of this aspiration of ours, its roots in our reality as persons, and the general prerequisites as well as the common obstacles to its accomplishment, would seem to be called for.

The aspiration to community

In my conversations with students about what it is they are looking for when they talk about the 'need for more community',

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I have gained the following impressions.

First of all, what they seem to want is to be distinctive members of a group, that is, something larger than themselves as individuals, but in which, nonetheless, they are accepted and can function as individuals. They speak of the need for a shared interest, to the accomplishment of which, however, each is allowed to make his own distinctive contribution. Much emphasis is placed on this idea of *letting* the individual, in his very association with others, also *be* completely himself. They do not want the group prescribing for the individual the way he should behave or the precise contribution he is supposed to make. Hence their mistrust of forms and structures, at least when these are made matters of primary concern. Pre-occupation with structure not only leaves individuals as isolated as ever they were; it provides no room even for their emergence as individuals.

All this may, at first sight, seem curious. Instead of centring on community, the interest of these young people would appear to be focused on individuality. The paradox, however, is only apparent. For there is no radical opposition between these two notions. Indeed, as young people quite clearly discern, community is the condition and context of genuine individuality. Individuality apart from relatedness, individuality that is unrecognized, unappreciated, unwelcomed by others, is without import or significance. It is simply like that of a stick or a stone, a matter of spatial separateness and not human at all. Moreover, concern for community as the matrix of individuality is not simply concern for oneself. It is a concern rather for such conditions as will liberate the unique powers of all involved. Indeed, it is a search for something common, a common life in which all share and by which each is nourished, a life of which each can say: 'it is not *mine* merely; it is *ours*'. Born of the conviction that 'I' can be myself significantly only in union with 'you', the search for community is the search to create a genuine 'we' whose realization is at the same time the realization of its members, and the only thing that can realize them. Unless 'we' are, no one is. Until 'we' come into being, no one really exists.

The aspiration to community would thus seem to be profoundly ontological. It is a groping for a greater reality.

Person and Community

Since an appreciation of this character of the aspiration is basic to any attempt to fulfil it, it may be well to explore it a little further

and trace it to its roots in man's nature as a person.

It is sometimes said that man as a person is 'open to the Infinite', that his life is 'a continual movement of self-transcendence'. There is truth behind these phrases, and it has much to do with the hankering for 'more community'. However, unless one can get through to what they signify, phrases like these are apt to be taken as just so much mysticism, or even mystification.

Suppose, therefore, we start out by noting that human activity is not simply a matter of *reacting* to stimuli but of *responding* to meanings. Man is aware of his environment as acting upon him and calling for his response, and his actions are an effort to come to grips with his world in the light of his understanding of what is going on. This means that human action is never merely self-expression, a kind of unfolding of what is already there. Or better, in so far as it may in a particular case be mere self-expression and not also a response called for by the situation, it is not adequately human. Thus, for example, a man's statements are not warranted merely because he makes them. They are warranted only as based on evidence, only as grounded in reality. They must be more than merely the man's own and proceed also from the real beyond himself if they are to be valid. So also with a man's choices. A man's choices are not sound simply because they are his. They are sound only as supported by the world beyond himself in which they take effect.

Now this is part of what is meant by the statement that man's life is a continual movement of self-transcendence. Man is true to himself as man only in the measure that the activity which is his life has its roots not only in himself but in 'the other' as well and is actually a synthesis of both. To live as a man is to be continually going beyond oneself in response to the other, so that one's life becomes progressively the expression, not of self merely, but of all that is, of the inclusively real.

Here, however, we must make an important distinction. For the realm of the other to which the human self is correlative is not confined to the plural, actual (existent) others with whom he is continually rubbing elbows. If it were merely this, then a man's life would be no different from that of any other living thing. For any organism interacts with its environment in such a way that its life is a synthesis of intra-organic and extra-organic factors. The life of a plant is no less a matter of soil and light and air and moisture than it is of roots and stalks and leaves. Thus, any living thing (not man

only) is in a real sense a movement of self-transcendence; it is always moving beyond itself to incorporate what is not itself into its own life process. But where man differs from all other living things on earth is that his life as man is more than a reaction to existing conditions, more than a matter of simply fitting in and adjusting to what is already there. Man's life is critical and creative. Man is continually transforming existing conditions, both internal and external in favour of something genuinely new. He is essentially a reformer, a being for whom 'what is' can never be finally decisive, but only 'what ought to be'.

This means that man's horizon extends beyond the order of actual entities within which he finds himself, and that it reaches to Being itself. Being itself is not what exists, but what has a *right* to exist, what can *claim* man's allegiance. It is that which calls for a *yes* without qualification, that indeed to which the core of man's being as person is already a yes, and that, finally, in the light of which every actual and determinate accomplishment, including man himself and his works, is subject to criticism. Being itself is that beyond which there is nothing; it is the Real as absolute, unconditioned, self-grounded and justified, all-inclusive. It is that in which everything that exists participates, but which no existent exhausts. Man's openness to this comprehensive value, which reaches infinitely beyond what exists, prevents him from ever taking the actual as final. It is the source of his restlessness, his endless yearnings, his creativity. It is the root of his ethical concerns, the spring of his moral and religious life. To the extent that his choices are fully grounded, they are grounded in this. The really and finally 'better' is that which is better from this point of view; it is that alternative which more fully embodies Being itself, which more closely approximates to Being itself. Man's openness to Being itself is precisely what makes him man. For man is Being's agent. His vocation is to be the agency by which the comprehensive value of Being itself comes to light and is progressively realized. His essential calling is to promote Being.

All this may sound far-fetched. It is indeed far removed from the usual way we think of ourselves. I would maintain, however, that human experience cannot begin to be understood if this fundamental dimension of man's make-up is ignored. More to the point here, however, is its connection with man's hunger for community. If the relation to Being itself is at the root of everything human, it is also at the root of this aspiration. How is this so?

Individual man's longing for community is a longing to have his own life make sense. He is in search for the ground of his own being. Aware that Being as value transcends him on every side, he is unable to say yes wholeheartedly to his activities so long as they are only *his*, or yes-to-himself, their source, so long as he remains isolated and alone. What he wants – a want that springs from the very centre of his reality as person – is that his life and action, while remaining wholly *his*, a genuine and spontaneous expression of himself, should somehow be *more* than *his*. They must, to be sure, remain *his*. He cannot be a yes to Being and betray himself as an agent of Being. To place an act in which he himself does not believe, an act which does not spring from the centre of himself but on the contrary is alien to himself, is in so far forth to place himself beyond redemption. For if a man does not live in his actions, he does not live anywhere; he is already dead and gone. Yet their being his own is not enough. So long as they spring from *a* being and not also from Being itself, they lack final import.

How can a person's actions have final import? If the world with which they deal is merely a world of things and of people treated as things, the answer is: They cannot. For the world of things is only the body of my life, the matter on which my freedom is exercised. Instead of lifting me out of myself, they are, by my activity, stamped as mine and absorbed into my own world. Science and technology can extend the range of my self-expression, but they cannot ground it. The control I exercise over things cannot make my life more than an expression of myself.

However, what domination cannot accomplish, cooperation can. A genuinely conjoint activity is a doing not merely of what *I* want, but of what *you* want. As willed not only by me nor only by you, but by *us*, it is born of being as transcending each of us and enveloping us both. It is thus more nearly an expression of Being itself than an act of mere self-assertion ever could be. To be able to be oneself in a common undertaking is thus to experience oneself confirmed in one's very being by transcendent reality. And in the measure that the community thus established approaches universality, it is Being itself, the inclusively real, that becomes progressively one's actual support and ground.

Needless to say, any actual community is always, as actual, a limited affair. It is a finite embodiment of man's movement of self-transcendence towards Being itself. Since the achieved integration is inevitably something local and bounded, there always

remain other powers of Being, other persons, outside it. If these others are excluded in principle, e.g. on the all too common pretext that a 'we' can only exist and define itself in opposition to a 'they', then the community severs itself from its roots in Being and betrays its own source. It becomes simply one parochial entity among others with no more claim on a man's allegiance than the the next one. The only way a community can remain an achievement of transcendence capable of grounding the individual self is by continually transcending its own limits. This means that whatever the aim of the common action in which a particular group is united, this aim must always be modified and controlled by the more radical aim 'to promote Being' which is identically man's vocation. Furthermore, if we say that the explicitation, celebration and implementation of this radical aim in all the affairs of men is the fundamental business of religion, we can see how a genuine community, however secular be its symbols, is also a religious reality.

Achieving community

This brings us to a consideration of some of the factors on which the achievement of community depends, and also of some of the obstacles that stand in the way.

Perhaps the first thing to be said is that in a genuine community the associated activity itself is in a sense more important than what it accomplishes externally. The communal relationship itself is a matter of central concern. There can, of course, be no community without a particular undertaking in which each of the members is really interested and in which they all share. Just as the radical aim to promote Being cannot exist by itself but only as qualifying and controlling the particular intentions an agent forms and executes, so community can only exist as a determinate way of achieving concrete and particular goals. But unless this *way* is appreciated as precisely that which enables an external transformation of the material world to be also a realization of Being itself, and unless the individuals rejoice in their very association with one another as that by which they are themselves confirmed in being, there is no community. If the individuals come together simply to realize more effectively a particular goal in which each is interested on his own account and not as something shared, then their inter-relationship is mechanical, not personal, and the movement of self-transcendence remains unrealized.

Thus John Dewey can say:

Wherever there is conjoint activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it, and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it in being *just because it is a good shared by all*, there is in so far a community.¹

The prime consequence of associated activity to be appreciated as good by all the persons who take part in it is the achievement of the association itself. Whatever be the value of the external accomplishment, it is precisely as the focus and inspiration of a *common* effort that it has its deepest significance.

This emphasis on the communal quality of the action brings up another crucial issue, that of *communication*. By communication I do not mean primarily 'expression', and even less the expression of something antecedent. Communication is precisely the continual establishment of community, the continual coming to agreement in action on the part of all the members. The way 'community' has often been understood in the past, practically all of the stress has fallen on structure, the need for a common pattern. It was thought that the very essence of community consisted in the conformity of individuals to an established programme. The acceptance by the individual of this 'common way' was precisely what made him a member of community. Unfortunately, what was not realized is that such a conception of community corrupts it from the start and prevents it from ever being an achievement of self-transcendence. A 'community' so conceived can integrate the self not as a self, that is, as a genuine initiative, but only as a kind of automaton. That is why, for all their yearning for community, young people are little moved by such ideals of community life as have been inherited from the past. For the important thing is not the acceptance from others of a common pattern of behaviour, but the continual creation *with others* of conjoint action. The forms of human association are genuinely human goods only as they are continually being instituted by the parties concerned. Only so is the self as self caught up in the common life. Thus, community in its only important sense is not the mere having of, and adherence to, common structures as given; it is rather the communicative *process* itself as continually giving rise to these structures and modifying them as needed.

In this connection, a point made earlier should not be overlooked.

¹ *The Public and its Problems* (New York, 1927), ch.V (italics mine).

Communication, in the sense specified, is essential to community not only in so far as it takes place within a group but also, and just as importantly, as it occurs between groups. For if it is through continually coming to terms with others that the individual transcends his own limitations, it is only by the same process that a particular community is saved from parochialism. Community is a continually developing affair, both internally and externally, or it represents no advance at all. There is perhaps no greater scandal than that professedly religious institutions have blocked the communicative process rather than promoted it, divided men from one another instead of uniting them.

One final point. Perhaps the greatest obstacle of all to the achievement of genuine community is man's tendency to absolutize his own work. What I mean is that the meanings and institutions which arise in the ongoing process of communication as means to its own furtherance, are detached from their roots in that process and set up as road-blocks to further development. Instead of their being subordinated to the process and continually re-evaluated in the light of their promotive or obstructive bearing upon it, the process itself is subordinated to them. There is a kind of fear that without rigid constraints, the process will run wild.

What we need most of all, therefore, is to regain our confidence in the communicative process itself. It is this process itself, the continual process of coming to agreement in action, and not its multifarious products, that is of central importance. As controlling the process instead of being controlled by it, our institutions are not only dead, but deadly. For if what we have said means anything, the communicative process is that alone in which and by which man achieves himself as Being's agent. Whatever restricts communication not only stifles community; it also stifles that which community is about, the developing life of Being itself in time.