

Seasons and Cycles in Evolving Community

John L. Hoff (from the 9/21/2011 eView)

I recently wrote an article for the “Village eView” that has received more response than usual. The response was to my remarks that communities are living social realities and that there is a natural waxing and waning in a community’s life. For instance, I mentioned two distinct cycles in the recent history of the Goodenough Community. I find myself wanting to write more about this.

I define community as “an organized social response to authentic human life.” Books like Riane Eisler’s “Chalice and the Blade” and the classic feminist corrective history, “The Great Cosmic Mother” by Monica Sjoo and Barbara Mor, remind us that formal histories tell the stories of governments, wars, and economics. However, the story of people, average people in ordinary jobs who are trying to be good human beings by passing forward the life-sustaining sense of community and culture, are ignored. At the beginning of our second decade in the 21st century we can see more clearly than most generations the relative futility of governments, multinational corporations, and militaries to improve the world by enriching the human experience. Media journalists are extremely critical of the modern state of affairs where the rich are getting richer and the poor are increasingly disadvantaged by a capitalist philosophy. Whenever I say a good word for community I find myself beginning with this observation: the fulfillment and welfare of people around us is vital to a sense of security and enjoyment. As we grow toward maturity we discover that the welfare of others is most important to us and that the future happiness of family and friends is vital to our own self-satisfaction. This supports my sense that all human beings are expressions of an archetype Person. We are all one Person and we evolve together or not. It is the evolution of the human spirit that is the focus of Community wherever we find it. The *glue* that holds all together and provides a common bond of faith is **friendship**.

Your community is that collection of people around you who inspire you to growth, learning, and service. Our communities quietly ask us to be good people who contribute something useful. I have never seen an estimate about the number of people worldwide who live in community and who work toward its improvement. To do this we would need to start acknowledging the contribution of indigenous people, of ethnic communities that have raised and guided immigrants, of self-help groups, organizations that facilitate people to meet the needs of others even while taking care of themselves, rural agrarian communities and other coops, spiritual communities, and service communities (for instance, YMCA, Boy Scouts, Salvation Army). Add to these intentional communities, work group communities, and the growing trend of real estate communities—and you’re just beginning to sense this vast and unrecognized force for good, the human community. This planet of people would be completely despairing were it not for the small supportive pods of people which we describe as communities. Human evolution has to do with our total capacity as human beings, the heart of which involves understanding that support and guidance from friends and family is crucial to cosmic human evolution. So we cannot give up on community, and it would be wise for us to extend conversation to those around us in hopes they would recognize and value learning to work well together. The small book by James Carse, “Finite and Infinite Games,” points out that finite games, where the object is to win, are not ultimately the most helpful games. Further, Carse states that there is only one infinite game, having to do with supporting and developing human beings to take a responsible role in the cosmos. How natural it is then that one

of the lenses through which communitarians see the world allows us to see most clearly the importance of “keeping on keeping on.”

I personally have a sense of the Goodenough Community for more than 40 years. The community of Goodenough friends, incorporated in 1981 as the American Association for the Furtherance of Community, spoke a lot about community as a society that facilitated us in learning, playing, and serving together. When mental health programs and human development programs were more common, this community offered education and training for many areas of life. In 1987 this shifted along with society to a more formal educational process offered by the Private School for Human Development. This has become the Village School for Human Development. Nowadays the societal shift involves a search for good ways to make a living and ways to increase your financial worth. We are now in an economic system that gives us a grade (our credit score) on how well we manage our money. By the way, the goals of the credit score game are to help you survive as a good player in an economic game that pits those with more money against those with less and vice versa. Society conscripts us for a finite game (money making) that is survival oriented instead of developing human consciousness.

So what? ...

So it appears that we have been successfully conscripted to play a series of finite games that get us trained for specific work functions rather than an education that helps us understand what it is that we are striving for as human beings. If you set empire building and war and economic slavery aside as harmful to humans, one can begin to visualize a planet of people getting to know each other and to understand the human situation. It was Robert Fulghum who wrote a book called, “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,” in which he makes the point that we are largely formed in the earliest years of our lives by parents, family, and friends. An agenda organized around family values will focus on the next crop of humans being cared for very well. Once human community saw the need for human development it found within its social being the impulse to health, learning, and public service. We must not stop these impulses which support human development yet I would like to see this community help each other to find what it is that we additionally need from our community in times like these.

So what would that look like? I think it would include helping us each become more aware of our core values and the core purpose of our own existences. I think it would involve practical, natural support for each other in feeling more worthwhile and more secure. Eventually we come to discover that we have almost everything we want when we are surrounded by a community of friends who care about our dreams and our situations. We will need to find each other once more as friends of the fragile, feeling human spirit.

So, we need to be more practical and less theoretical in our work as community. This will involve being more frank with each other about our social and political disillusionment. It will involve more honesty and candidness regarding what we worry about and what drains our lives of energy. It will involve obtaining “buy-in” from the whole family in order to be family at all. Such a process among us will soon show that we have been distracted by media propaganda that we’re living a superior life. We need to explore options by creating livelihoods that serve the common good. Colette and I have served generic Community for as long as we have supported the work of the Goodenough Community. We remain in support of efforts to raise and guide the human soul. The next phase of

our human evolution must be social in nature, and it requires us to begin by choosing each other as friends and co-workers in building a life that works for us.

So, our community, and I think all human communities are challenged to have conversations that inform a new conscience, one that's less materialistic. A new sense of values is required for emerging human consciousness.

So, I've been reading Joanna Macy's book, "Dharma and Development: Religion as Resource in the Sarvodaya Self-Help Movement" (1983), as well as several other books about future developments. It appears to me that whatever is to be accomplished will need to be done by groups of people working together to awaken in the process of improving their lives. Joanna Macy writes, "'May all beings be well and happy,' is the Buddhist wish in contrast to the Hegelian concept of the welfare of the majority. In a world where greed, and hatred, and ignorance are so well organized, is it possible for this thought of well-being to be effectively practiced for the regeneration of the individual and the society?" (p. 14). She spends the remainder of her book telling us how she saw this good thing happening in Sri Lanka and she affirms her belief that the human spirit naturally flows into social process when people are provided the opportunity to help themselves and befriend others at the same time.

So, I invite you to a continuing conversation about what our lives need most and what our spirits long for, and it won't be a better credit score.