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**Suzanne Keller: Community**

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## CHAPTER 1

### COMMUNITY: THE PASSIONATE QUEST



All of us carry within us more love and above all more longing than . . . society is able to satisfy.

—Karl Mannheim

When I asked the undergraduates in my Princeton University seminars on ideal communities what, if anything, they would want to change about their Princeton experience, their answers startled me. Most of the hundred or so students wished there were more of a sense of community. But why? I probed. The number of undergraduates is small, the university merits its reputation for its commitment that students be amply supplied with a great variety of activities and opportunities for social contacts and a social life beyond the classroom, and privacy when desired. What more could one possibly want? The replies of the students varied, of course, but the underlying themes were almost unanimous.

They mentioned the fragmentation and the lack of a unifying principle that would help to bridge distances across departments and help them integrate the exciting intellectual fare offered. This unifying princi-

ple would assist them in sorting out relevant from irrelevant, essential from trivial, information. They wanted to locate some basis for choosing one subject over another, other than the expansion of intellectual horizons, a star professor, or delight in learning, important as these obviously were.

They acknowledged also feelings of isolation amid all the lavish resources and sought to overcome these in various ways: Some turned to religion, others threw themselves into social life, volunteer work, or more intensive studies, while others sought romantic partners to cling to. Choosing a major resolved the smaller question of focus and identity but left hanging the larger question of purpose and meaning—what to work toward.

The accelerated tempo of their lives was another recurrent theme. Their packed days and evenings left little time for reflection.

Some also suggested that the lack of community may have helped lead to the unintended—and often deplored—segregation of students by race, regional origins, wealth, or religious affiliation. Instead of informal social contacts across groups, black students ate at one table, Hispanics at another, Asians at a third. Other tables were separated by prep school or major—engineering, for example. Some of this may be desirable for bonding, but much of it is antithetical to pluralism—a defensive banding together for solace through group affiliation.

As I listened to these young, bright students privileged in the opportunities offered by a great university, I was struck by how their concerns reflected the often-cited complaints about modernity: specialization, a sense of aimlessness, loneliness amid multitudes, the lack of a center and a grounded self. In a word, the missing community.

This must come as a surprise to those who consider community as superfluous for the most modern sectors of contemporary societies—the young, highly educated, technologically sophisticated, success-bent—which these students obviously are.

Of course, community is a chameleon term that is used in many, often contradictory, ways. It might be helpful to begin this inquiry with two prevalent perspectives.

One is that community is akin to an organism where the whole is more important than individual members. This organic model is historically the oldest. It is also all-embracing, hence less well suited to modern circumstances, though it continues to prevail as a nostalgic fantasy of a lost Eden.

A more recent model, which developed in the West in response to revolutionary political and economic developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the “atomistic/contractarian” model, is based

on the idea of a social contract that binds “free persons” who have consented to live together.

Both models are present in the world today but to differing degrees. Sir Henry Maine (1864) saw a historic evolution from the organic to the contractarian model or, in his words, from status *to* contract, as in the technologically developed societies. On a world scale, however, the majority of people continue to live in relatively bounded communities that function as organisms rooted in tradition and precedent. Each conception has strengths and weaknesses. The organic conception gives too much power to the community and threatens to leave too little room for individual freedom, though this need not be so. Wylie’s portrait of the Vaucluse (1974) or Colette’s of Saint-Saveur en Puisaye (1953) portray communities where people were rich in individuality and tolerant of diversity, yet mindful of their interdependence and their need for one another.

The social contract model of community, most forcefully articulated by John Locke and Adam Smith, following, yet sharply divergent from Hobbes, stresses self-determination and autonomy, delimited government, and the self-regulating market. But the freedom and opportunities it exalts are double-edged, favoring those with personal and social resources and neglecting the economically and socially disadvantaged for whom freedom may mean poverty and social inferiority.

Each model also accords a different place to the common good and collective requirements. The organic model defines and structures the common good via divine or secular authorities. The contract model leaves it to the invisible hand or ignores it altogether unless prompted by an enlightened public or protesting minorities.

When Plato wrote *The Republic* he did not question the idea of community but assumed its indispensability, if only for lack of meaningful alternatives. What he wrestled with was how to obtain and preserve the just community within which humanity could live productively and peacefully imbued with a strong sense of interdependence and empathy.

In the several hundred years of the modern era, however, the questions have shifted and community has become problematic. A threatened species whose demise some welcome and others deplore, it is alternately longed for or ignored as passé, as people struggle with Camus’s question “Where can I feel at home?” It is a question that surfaces not only for the wanderers, the exiled, the homeless but also for their more settled confreres in cities and suburbs at the top of the survival chain. One way this question resonates now is in the search for community — how to find it, nurture it, and keep it.

Given the profusion of definitions of community, one is often at a

loss as to how to separate the essential from the superfluous, especially since there are always exceptions to the general rule. For example, most scholars define community as rooted in territorial/spatial and generational togetherness. But for the Christian Gnostics, the root of community rested on the emancipation of human beings from earth, blood ties, and place, and linked by universal aspirations.

In short, the term “community” is an all-encompassing one. The territorial connotation of community is surely the most familiar and, in my view, the most basic. But there is also community considered rhetorically, as in reference to the academic community, the sailing community, or the bohemian community. Hence there is the danger of attaching the term “community” somewhat indiscriminately to all human aggregates.

Community may be used in a philosophical sense, as a reference to a moral or spiritual entity, engendering communion with one’s fellows and a fate that is shared, or as a term to designate distinct units of territorial and social organization, such as hamlets, villages, towns—all the typical places in which people maintain their homes, raise families, and establish roots.

Despite this profusion of emphases, some basic agreements do exist, and the following themes recur repeatedly.

### **Community as Place, Turf, Territory**

The idea of a bounded, identifiable territory is taken for granted by virtually every serious commentator until we get to cyberspace in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, which we shall discuss later.

Community is the antithesis of Gertrude Stein’s description of Los Angeles: “There’s no there, there.” With few exceptions, community always denotes a there. The territory that encloses a community offers a proximity and density conducive to other kinds of closeness. No matter in which container—village, town, suburb—community as captured, delimited space shapes the scale of collective life and the patterns of life created therein.

### **Community as Shared Ideals and Expectations**

The focus here is on a life in common, resulting in shared emotional stakes and strong sentimental attachments toward those who share one’s life space. These are the “habits of the heart” in de Tocqueville’s memo-

rable phrase; they are states of mind that generate reciprocity, a sense of duty, and the moral sentiments that forge collective coherence and endurance.

### **Community as a Network of Social Ties and Allegiances**

Of the ninety-four definitions of community identified by Hillery (1955), social bonds and social interaction were cited in two-thirds of them. But social interaction does not operate alone. It reflects and reinforces additional dimensions—a given scale, shared goals and sentiments that bind people to their common enterprise.

When directed toward common goals—let us say, support for schools or recreational programs—social interaction can become a source of unity. And unity is a central component of the word “community,” which is a combination of two Latin terms with opposite meanings: *com*, with or together; and *unus*, the number one. Hence community is a union of many elements.

### **Community as a Collective Framework**

Here community defines, names, encloses, organizes aggregate activities and projects, and encompasses the institutions and rules that guide the collectivity, including:

- Legitimate governance, authority, and leadership during emergencies and crises
- Ideologies that justify collective arrangements and goals and
- Values that sustain social solidarity and commitments

Collective frameworks interpenetrate with the physical shell and the cultural mold to create unique community configurations.

### **What Community Is Not**

To arrive at a definitional shorthand for community, it may be useful to pause for a moment to consider what community is not.

Interpersonal intimacy is often considered antithetical to community. Gossiping across a fence, sharing secrets, joining to do battle for a common cause do not by themselves suffice for community. Such closeness needs structural, cultural, and sentimental supports as well as an altruistic outreach of affection and empathy to bind a totality.

The same might be argued for formal organizational membership. If organizations are joined to pursue personal interests, they are too limited for community: “With such egoism, there is no love of others for their sakes, no identification of their good as one’s own . . . no tie that binds” (Mary Rousseau 1991, p. 52). For community to exist, individuals must not only be close to one another but moving toward collective goals as well.

Nor are group affiliation or social categorization on the basis of race, class, gender, nationality, or generation automatically insignias of community. These have community potential only if individuals consider them significant bases for a shared identity. To qualify for community, social categorization must be translated into a consciousness of kind, a sense of belonging, and a shared destiny, past or future.

Then there is *communitarianism*, often confused with community. Beyond their linguistic kinship, the two terms are only tangentially related. Community is concrete and rooted in place. Communitarianism is abstract, emphasizing a set of moral and philosophical principles—social justice, civic responsibility, cooperation—for citizens to strive for wherever they reside. Communitarians, as represented in key works by Pocock (1975), MacIntyre (1980), Sandel (1982), Walzer (1983), Sullivan (1982), Gutmann (1985), and Etzioni (1993), oppose the impersonality of bureaucracies and advocate decentralization and a human scale infused with traditional human values.

But while communitarians do not deal with actual communities, they have been a critical force for drawing attention to the idea of community in the public dialogue. In essence, their message is that the culture of individualism, the laissez-faire market society of consumerism, and self-advancement have been carried too far. A return to the basics—civic commitment, social solidarity, public participation, and devotion to the common good—is urgently called for. Nothing less than human survival is at stake.

Their impressive body of work notwithstanding, there is one question that communitarians do not raise and therefore cannot answer, namely, how their high ideals can be realized. How can one move from moral exhortation to being just, cooperative, responsive, and responsible to the living test and concrete texture of community?

That question is at the heart of this book, which seeks to separate the term “community” from all-encompassing generalizations, grasp its significant dimensions, and study its evolution over time. The course of this evolution remains largely uncharted, since most studies, mired in static description, focus on a single moment in time, thus missing the long-range view. This is where the study of a new community is crucial. Unlike established communities that have grown in unplanned, piece-

meal fashion, the secret of their births well hidden from view, a community in the making permits one to monitor its often tortuous gestation. This can tell us much about how a community comes to life, who makes it happen, the high and low points of this development, and at what point the “newborn” can look forward to a long and productive life.

These issues and others are explored in this book using the genesis of Twin Rivers, the first planned unit development in the state of New Jersey. This longitudinal excursion over several decades reveals the deeper forces that build up and tear down the tissue of community. It also provides a context for addressing questions about the possibility of community that have preoccupied thinkers for thousands of years.

So far, then, we can say that community is both archetype and elusive ideal. Even in our time, when communities are being envisaged for outer space as well as for cyberspace, there are always two recurrent questions: How can self be linked to community and how can community be linked to society?

De Tocqueville was one of many to underscore that linkage, especially in his volumes on nineteenth-century America (1990, vols. 1, 2). He saw collective responsibility, civic concern, and a morally sound private life as parts of a whole. The investment of one’s energies and passions in the community gave shape and direction to one’s personal life, which in turn fed back into community.

By contrast, contemporary individualism, with its accent on privacy and separateness makes community problematic. For those who consider community essential for human existence, the loss of community means the loss of a central part of human identity, a “signal of a humanity gone astray” (Lasch 1991). In the same vein, Bellah (1991) describes contemporary Americans as “suspended in glorious isolation.” Though they may not be aware of it, they are missing one language, while being too fluent in the other—the language of individualism, where people are separate and competitive. The missing language is the language of community, where individuals are seen as organically connected to each other (*ibid.*). This second language is much more difficult to learn given the individualistic bent of modern societies where striving for the common good while pursuing one’s own interests becomes inherently contradictory.

Still, community continues to have a magical ring. Modernity, for all its technological wonders, has not managed to dispel the need for it. Never a simple matter, this need has become vastly more complex. Always somewhat mysterious and enigmatic, community cannot simply be grafted onto the huge bureaucracies of modern life. This trivializes the concept of community (Bender 1978, pp. 143–44). For, “no large-scale organization,” writes Nisbet, “can really meet the psychic demands of

individuals because by its very nature it is too large, too complex, too bureaucratized and altogether too aloof from the residual meanings by which humans live.” Individuals need “communities small in scale but solid in structure” that will offer them a sense of security and fulfillment (Nisbet 1960, p. 82).

Thus, those who predicted that industrialization would cause the death of community need to reconsider their conclusion, as the continued salience of community defies its premature burial.

Modernity, to be sure, promised much, but it also took much away. In the past, community represented a total web of life. There was a perceived order guiding the cosmos, and life, though not secure, was somehow predictable. To be expelled from one’s community was akin to death.

With industrial urbanism, the taken-for-granted-world collapsed and the “disrupted transcendence” and “great feeling of meaninglessness” led to an often intense search for “one unifying thing” (Luckman 1970, pp. 585–86). For many, the newly won freedoms spelled rootlessness. It was harder to fit the pieces of one’s life together. This might work well for mobile cosmopolites seeking adventure and opportunity, but it left the more traditionally minded emotionally stranded. In time, the desire for stability and security propelled many to search for ethnic, racial, or religious roots in a move to “escape from freedom” (Fromm 1969). To them, community beckoned as the nucleus of human connectiveness and solidarity in a world of huge Kafka-esque institutions — corporations, city halls, suburban malls, government bureaucracies.

An interesting historic example of this struggle stems from Boimondau, a French factory producing watch cases in Valence, France. When the employees turned the factory into a cooperative venture they were at first exhilarated by the liberation from the hierarchy of the workplace. But, to their surprise, it soon became evident that too much freedom resulted in a kind of chaotic anarchy that was as destructive to achieving their goals as excessive control and the suppression of spontaneity had been. After considerable soul searching, the workers realized their need for some kind of binding force and a shared ethical basis. Hence, in trial-and-error fashion they went on to reestablish rules and work toward a balance of freedom and discipline embodied in a lawful community.

The cry for freedom and the need for order has a universal cadence, one deeply linked to the nature of community. Banish or suppress the communal impulse, and it will come back with a vengeance. Sometimes it does so in relatively benign form, as it did in the utopian experiments that proliferated during the nineteenth century, but it can also emerge brutally, as it has in various forms of ethnic- and racially based genocide.

## Misconceptions about Community

A common misconception is that community must result in the suppression, even the extinction, of individuality. As always, this depends in part on the definition employed. If individualism is seen as directly related to community, then community and individualism are and have been compatible in many traditional and preliterate societies (Diamond 1981).

In contrast, contemporary individualism, with its accent on anonymity and separation from others, emphasizes the individual, not in relation to a community, but as uniquely different from it. The two are constructed as antagonists, which makes them incompatible.

Another misconception speaks of society and community interchangeably. This effaces the distinctiveness of each.

Society might be thought of as an overarching system of social, political, and cultural arrangements that encompass the totality. Its practices are formalized and abstract; its scale is superpersonal.

By contrast, community is tangible, proximate, based on direct contact, mutual awareness, and a sense of empathy with those with whom one shares one's life in a definite place. In community, self and terrain are intertwined.

Without communal underpinnings, society tends to become rigid, ritualistic, lifeless. People may go through the required motions but they do so amid distrust, indifference, apathy. Hence we must make room in our thinking for the "little community" (Redfield 1960, p. 41) to nourish the great society, not as its antithesis but as its complement.

One fact attested to over and over again is how fragile communities actually are and how easily they become undone. Calamities are thought to strengthen communities but the contrary is often the case.

In the Buffalo Creek calamity, analyzed by Erikson (1976), for example, a seventeen-mile-long coal-mining area was deluged by 132 million gallons of water when the dam collapsed. In a minute, everything—houses, livestock, vehicles, and people—was swept away, leaving 80 percent of the five thousand residents homeless. In the aftermath of the silence, numbness, and shock, the integuments of community were laid bare. The community was destroyed, not only physically but culturally and symbolically.

Before the flood, Buffalo Creek had been homogeneous both materially and culturally. Its people worked, married, raised children, and lived by similar rules and values. Community was "the envelope in which they lived." Families, neighbors, and friends formed a series of concentric circles that linked strangers and intimates in a shared round

of life. Where the wider society extolled the separate, self-propelled individual, each an island unto him- or herself, Buffalo Creek drew its boundaries around whole groups. Neighbor would reach out to neighbor, and the fate of one affected all. "Like when somebody was hurt, everybody was hurt" (*ibid.*).

In seeking to grasp the essence of community for the shell-shocked survivors, Erikson singled out the "networks of understandings," and a "constant readiness to look after one's neighbors, or, rather, to know without being asked what needed to be done." In contrast to the individualistic ethos of the society at large, here the community was the key actor, and emotions generally ascribed to individuals were ascribed to the community: "It is the community that cushions pain, the community that provides a context for intimacy, the community that represents morality." This confirmed Erikson's conclusion that the loss and despair community members experienced was a reaction not only to the disaster itself but also to the destruction of the web of community. "There's a part of us all missing somewhere" (*ibid.*, pp. 189, 193–194, 196). It was the end of the world, a wound that would never heal.

In the aftermath of the deluge, two developments proved surprising. One was the absence of the community outreach and empathy that often accompanies such catastrophes and gathers the survivors into a "community of sufferers," a "democracy of distress," or a "post-disaster Utopia" (*ibid.*, p. 200). Trauma does, at times, strengthen community, as shared pain mobilizes latent energies to repair the damaged texture of collective life. That did not happen in Buffalo Creek, perhaps because the ubiquity of the disaster left its victims disconnected. There was no remnant intact or strong enough on which to rebuild and regenerate.

The other development was a surge of immorality that accompanied the ensuing depression and demoralization. Thefts, delinquencies, alcoholism, and indifference multiplied, as "the boundaries of moral space began to collapse." Long-term marriages fell apart, friendships faded. When the moral and material framework of the community was destroyed, so were the inner supports it had sustained. In the long run perhaps, muses Erikson, "morality is a form of community participation." People's health deteriorated as well with ailments that no medical diagnosis could explain. "Health has something to do with feeling whole and in harmony" with the larger totality, which suggests that the health of the individual is dependent on the state of communal health. When the community is intact, it can provide a protective layer of insulation and a reassuring camouflage of real life, since "one of the crucial jobs of a culture is to edit reality in such a way that it seems manageable" (*ibid.*, pp. 205, 209, 226, 240). All of that was lost in Buffalo Creek.

Eventually, the people of Buffalo Creek would win \$13.5 billion from the coal company that was responsible for the collapse of the dam, but they would never recover their sense of community, of meaning, of wholeness.

Ironically, the help extended by outside agencies, in this case by HUD (Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development), inadvertently reinforced the community's breakdown. HUD focused on individuals, dispensing material resources on a first-come, first-served basis, regardless of the neighborhood in which people had lived or how much they had lost. Well-meaning and helpful to individual victims as this may have been, it left the victimized community unattended. By ignoring the community context of the disaster, it froze the residents in their isolation.

This is a good illustration of the collision between two different social orders, the one personal, rooted, emotionally coherent, the other impersonal, categorical, and based on individual interest. Much of what was lost could not be retrieved because it rested on things unspoken and tacitly understood. Neighborly rituals and relations, for example, could not simply be transplanted. Once disrupted, one cannot carry them into new situations "like negotiable emotional currency" (*ibid.*, p. 191).

Traumatized communities differ from an assemblage of traumatized persons because a collective trauma affects all simultaneously. Collective trauma, by damaging the "bonds attaching people" to one another, erodes the core, the heart, of the afflicted communities and precipitates their deaths.

## Abiding Questions

The nature of community has engaged thinkers from ancient times to the present. Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, de Tocqueville, Marx, Tönnies, and others posed the central questions that absorb us still. Among them are:

- How are communities created and maintained over time?
- How is a "spirit of community" generated?
- How are human differences bridged for the sake of the common good?

In ancient times, and for centuries until the modern age, there may have been too much community, as community stifled individuals under the yoke of collective demands. Today, there may be too little community and the longing for community is displaced into substitute or illusory forms. From time to time, the need bursts through in frantic, exces-

sive, and at times, explosive ways sweeping order and reason aside in favor of a passionate but disruptive collective frenzy. One thinks of postsoccer mayhem, mass revelries, inflagations of hate, or worshipful throngs teetering on the edge of hysteria. It is especially at such times that questions about community—or the lack thereof—come to the fore. But what also becomes painfully apparent is how little we understand about such mass phenomena or the lack of community that permits collective anonymous violence to surface.

This book is several books—a literal account of a community in formation; an ongoing tale of the trials and tribulations of the common life; a report of how plans and programs become living realities—but principally it is a book about people and their struggle to fashion unity and community.

The big social questions yield their answers but slowly. The explorer who wishes to penetrate them requires time, patience, and persistence. The nature and genesis of community is such a question. If it is true that the “little community” is seen as “something to be made good” and as “something through which to make the great society good” (Redfield 1960, p. 154), it deserves careful and sustained study, which I have endeavored to do.

By studying one community in depth, I hope also to illumine questions about communities in general. Many forces are at work here, both local and global, historic and contemporary, internal and external, ideal and real.

Chapters 2–3 of Part I, *Community as Image and Ideal*, examine guiding theories, historic prototypes, and core concepts of community as background for the substantive analysis of the in-depth exploration of a new community in the making.

Part II, *A Community Is Launched*, monitors the course of community formation for a middle-class American population.

Part A, *Creating Roots*, spells out the launching of Twin Rivers, New Jersey, a planned development—its physical setting; the social characteristics of its first inhabitants (chapter 4); and the residents’ reactions to their neighbors, houses, and facilities (chapter 5) as they move toward self-governance (chapter 6).

Part B, *Creating a Collective Self*, discusses the extent of community participation (chapter 7) and the nature of friendships and social relations (chapter 8).

Part C, *Building the Foundations*, focuses on the role of space and design (chapter 9); private and public rights and responsibilities (chapter 10); the first collective undertaking, the lawsuit (chapter 11); the

critical role of leaders (chapter 12); and the forces for unity and division (chapter 13).

Part III, Old Imperatives, New Directions, reflects on key themes and issues for communities in the future (chapter 14) and on the import of key findings (chapter 15). An epilogue on community in cyberspace concludes the book.