

The Practice of Community
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Students on our campuses seem to have a renewed interest in the value, or set of values, associated with being in community. They seem also to harbor some misunderstanding about the nature of strong community. Their interest may stem from modern pressures that affect the development of social skills. After all, this particular generation of university student has experienced heavily programmed childhoods and the greatest opportunity for solitary entertainment, the latter owing to computer technology. Whereas their grandparents enjoyed reading "Look" and "Life" magazines, This generation has grown up on "People," "Us," and even "Self" magazines. Consistent with these observations, some of our students arrive on campus with an understandable sense of discomfort with their natural, unprotected selves. For them, communal situations are more easily engaged creatively when there is some distance between the real self and the social self. Speaking through avatars in an artificial reality or acting through the haze of alcohol for some may provide that comfortable distance.

In addition to a need to further develop community membership skills, students often have a somewhat limited definition of what community means. For purposes of illustration, consider an incident that took place in the fall of 2003 on the campus of Emory University. That fall, the campus community was rocked by the use of a racial epithet uttered by a senior faculty member in an open meeting. In retrospect, the incident precipitated what have turned out to be valuable conversations and important continuing programs dealing with community building. But early in the process of responding to the community insult and beginning to work toward community healing, an interesting understanding—or rather a misunderstanding—of the definition of community was discovered. Emory's leadership vowed to do its best to guide discussions, programs, and policies to help build a culture of community that would be in a better place the next time such an incident might occur. The next time?! Students' first reaction to this pledge by the University administration initially was one of surprise and disappointment that university leaders might imagine that someday might bring a next time. Instead, they imagined that if Emory could "get it right," community should evolve to the point where there would never be a next time. It became clear that some imagined community to be an achievable state, a destination marked by harmony and unanimity where offensive remarks are never heard, differences are absent or politely suppressed, and justice is exercised innately. Perhaps this Utopian definition of community comes from, or at least is reinforced by, Walt Disney-style fairy tales which conclude by assuring us that all "lived happily ever after," presumably not requiring the use of any additional effort to maintain relationships or happiness.

As second insight came from a discussion with a student group that, when asked to describe strong community, responded initially that am important mark of a strong community is its ability to support those in need. As noble as that element of the

definition of community sounded at first, it was quickly tarnished when it became clear that most could see ways that the community might support them in times of need, but were unsure that they would be comfortable making a sacrifice to meet someone else's needs.

Instead of community being understood as a Utopian state or as an institution to provide individual support, it is perhaps better conceived of as a collection of practices that contribute to the mutual benefit and mutual burden of the members of the community. In the same sense that professions *practice* health care, and *practice* law, it is helpful to understand that we have an obligation not so much to seek a Utopia, but rather to pursue the *practice* or *practices* of community. What are some of the essential practices of community? One could generate any number of lists of varying length, but most of those lists would include communication, engagement, sustainability, leadership, and diversity, all pursued with integrity and employing ethical behavior.

The practice of community is something that benefits any cultural unit, from two-person partnerships to the global community. University communities, in particular, enjoy a special opportunity to be deliberate about how critical practices of community are examined and exercised. Perhaps it is possible to establish a level of community practice on our campuses that will instill in our students that they can expect to, and are expected to, make a positive difference in their local communities, wherever they are, to improve continuously the practice of community, even beyond the campus.

The opportunities for our campuses may be more clearly understood by taking a closer look at the five community practices mentioned above.

COMMUNICATION

What passes for communication in American society spans a broad spectrum. Since we receive much of our daily information from sources such as newspapers, magazines, and television, that do not invite interaction, our communication styles tend to evolve to one of two extremes. At one extreme is a poor style which thwarts interactive communication or even thoughtful reflection in the name of honesty, of all things. In most big cities, one needs only to scan across the AM dial to discover practitioners of this form of so-called communication. They often are the talking heads who represent some extreme form of political ideology, and, all in the name of honesty, articulate "in your face" diatribes, routinely hanging up on and verbally abusing telephone callers who seek to challenge or clarify the points being made. At the other end of the spectrum is a communication style that also thwarts communication, but this one in the name of civility. In the South, it might be called Southern hospitality run amok. In this case, the communicator (or perpetrator) values politeness more highly than honesty, and so, again, there is no genuine communication taking place between parties.

The goal for the campus community is something in the middle, employing what might be called civil honesty. In fact, civil honesty may be at the core of what academic freedom is all about. Academic freedom is, after all, different from freedom of speech. It is the freedom not so much to the right to speak freely, but more to the right to be heard.

Accomplished practitioners of civil honesty practice academic freedom by engaging in discussions of the most difficult topics, doing so in a manner that keeps people with disparate views engaged and in the room. When we fail at civil honesty, our ideas are tuned out, or people physically leave our presence; thus we deny the exercise of academic freedom.

Clearly, proper communication is a critical practice for academic community. The temptation for all of us is to assume advocacy roles rather than “scientific” approaches to our communication practices. An advocate, such as an attorney, is paid a priori to advocate for a particular position. In preparing that argument, the advocate assembles all of those points of fact that support the position, but only those facts that support the position. The scientist often forms an a priori position as well, a hypothesis. However, the hypothesis is then examined by assembling as many of the fact as available, whether or not they support the hypothesis.

Universities can demonstrate open communication by inviting difficult discussion to their campuses. On February 22, 2008, former President Jimmy Carter came to Emory University’s campus to discuss his book, *Palestine: Peace not Apartheid*. The book presents an argument for the role of Israeli state in perpetuating Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a position very much unsupported by Israel and largely by the American Jewish community. In the weeks and months following, Emory hosted on campus additional speakers addressing both sides of the issues. These included Dennis Ross, former Middle East envoy in the Clinton administration, and Ken Stein, expert on modern Israel, to speak in opposition to Carter’s text. Hannan Ashrawi, Palestinian scholar and statesperson supported Carter’s assertions. Other conversations and activities for exploring this complex conflict continue. The point was not to imagine that the Emory community might resolve the issues, but rather that Emory could engage in them, exercising special privilege given to universities to provide a form for people with violently opposed views to engage non-violently. The campus has not yet decided on the next opportunity to showcase courage in the pursuit of civil honesty.

ENGAGEMENT

Any number of ranking systems and popular magazines purport to describe completely our campus communities by listing numerical data and rankings. Of course, many community attributes are well described in numerical terms, but others are merely partially described, and some not described at all. Engagement is a characteristic of community often inferred from student participation data or from demographic breakdowns. But there is an important difference between being a statistically diverse collection of people and being a genuinely diverse community of people. In Emory’s case, in 2001, racial statistics were such that Emory was lauded by evaluators and ranking systems for its statistically impressive demographic diversity relative to other major research universities. The campus community could not blame its composition as the root cause of its discomfort and difficulty in dealing with racial insult. In other words, it appeared as though the community was properly assembled and co-existing, but it was not engaged.

Part of the difficulty on our university campuses in the area of engagement stems again from misconceptions around what it means to be in community and in relationship. All people in general, but students in particular, have a strong desire to agree. They are very uncomfortable with ambiguity. Furthermore, students on most of our campuses are so bright that they can predict with amazing accuracy whether or not a discussion addressing a difference will ultimately converge to a comfortable and agreeable conclusion. The uncanny ability to predict whether or not a conversation can resolve in harmony, coupled with a discomfort for ambiguity, means that certain topics may never be discussed in conversation—it's simply too risky.

Many of our campuses are putting together programs that break down barriers to engagement so that disparate opinions are enticing and invite conversation rather than set off alarms that obstruct conversation. Consider once again Emory's 2003 incident of racial insult. From that incident, Emory developed its *Transforming Community* project as one such program. It invites discussion groups back to historical periods in Emory's history dealing with moments of racial conflict and of triumph. In 1906, Emory fired a professor for advocating for African-American rights and opposition to lynching. And in the 1960, Emory led the charge in overturning at the State Supreme Court level a Georgia law that would have removed tax-free status from colleges and universities that chose to integrate. Revisiting these moments in history allows us all to rediscover language, lines of reasoning, and dimensions of compassion, and further to discuss them with the certainty that our conclusions will not change history. By rediscovering that language and raising our sensitivities, it is possible to translate those skills to the present and be prepared for future discussions.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability in the broadest sense, in the sense that it is a true practice of community, goes beyond the currently fashionable definition regarding stewardship of resources and the environment. More fundamentally, sustainability is an awareness of interconnectedness, the fact that actions or practices that benefit one member of a community might have a detrimental effect on the broader community, and perhaps even a long-term detrimental rebound to the individual. Thus understood, the practice of sustainability does indeed call us to be aware of our responsibilities to the broader community when tempted to practice wasteful or selfish consumption. But sustainability, broadly defined, also calls us to examine the potential consequences to the broader community of other forms of selfish practice; for example, seeking to advance our social or political position by practicing character assassination of others. Although such practices are persistent in the political community, ultimately they are not sustainable.

LEADERSHIP

There may be an inverse relationship between our absolute understanding of any given topic and the amount that we publish on it. It has been observed that there are more published titles on the topic of leadership than there are on diets and weight loss. But it is

not the innumerable personal leadership styles contributing to tomes of popular literature that are germane to the practice of community. Rather, leadership is a practice of community that stems from the desire to show others a better way.

Acts of genuine leadership can be passive or active. They can be exercised with or without formal title or portfolio within the community. Absent the practice of this type of community, we risk becoming mere critics instead of leaders. Unfortunately, the academic life prepares us well to be critics. When faculty are asked to perform peer review of manuscripts or research proposals, they execute that function successfully by providing a critique and conducting a diligent search for shortcomings and errors. It is an important quality assurance practice, but it tends to hone only our skills as critics, not as leaders. A similar necessary evil exists in our understandable and legitimate practices of student evaluation and classroom grading. More often, these practices provide incentives for the right answer and disincentives for the wrong answer, and are not useful vehicles for stimulating the sort of creativity that leads to new answers, providing opportunity for leadership.

DIVERSITY

With all that has been written and debated about America's history concerning race and difference, one might imagine that this is a topic has been sufficiently examined and can be held up as an example of a community practice upon which we can all agree. However, what has emerged as an understanding of the effective practice of diversity often misses the mark, at least regarding how diversity can be practiced in our university campus communities. Most often, when asked about the essential ingredient for true diversity within a community, people think of tolerance. But mere tolerance alone is an insufficient goal for the genuine practice of diversity in community.

Here is an argument for a diversity goal beyond that of mere tolerance on a university campus. Recall that discovery is one of the activities at the very core of every academic institution. Students are guided through class work and curricular activities to discover for themselves what already is known. Scholars and researchers seek to discover and generate new knowledge. In the final analysis, though, at universities we study really only three categories: people, events, and ideas. One cannot claim with integrity to be a genuine student of a person, event, or idea, without seeking to understand it from as many different perspectives as possible. For example, can one claim truly to be a student of Abraham Lincoln if she or he has not considered how Lincoln's life was perceived by family, colleagues, international observers, slave owners, abolitionists, and slaves themselves, among others who might have perspectives and opinions on this great man? There are medical perspectives, historical perspectives, political perspectives, and economic perspectives. Clearly, then, if someone is to claim with integrity that she or he is a student of Abraham Lincoln, diversity is not something merely to be tolerated, but rather it is needed; it is essential. We practice diversity in community best when we develop a hunger and a thirst for it that comes from being inquiry-driven.

In addition to diversity's being a necessary consequence of being inquiry-driven, the practice of diversity in community requires also respect for and insistence upon authenticity. Obviously, if individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives are invited into our campus communities, but only under the condition that they suppress their authentic selves, then the richest gifts that diversity contributes to our goals of inquiry and discovery are lost. Authenticity in support of the benefits of diversity provides room for authentic expression and chances for individuals to experience each other authentically.

Our academic institutions have special opportunities to help reinforce the message of authenticity. A simple illustration of practiced authenticity at Emory is the practice at its major student convocations, including commencement ceremonies, to conclude with benedictions from the traditions of the major world religions represented on the campus—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Those delivering the benedictions are given two simple instructions. The first is to be very brief. The second is to be fully authentic. As a result, the imam often chants and then translates for the rest of the community. The rabbi prays in Hebrew and then translates, and has been known on occasion to blow the ram's horn, the shofar. The Christian prays openly and unabashedly “in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.” This practice is in contrast to more commonly offered pantheistic benedictions and invocations that neither invoke a particular deity nor call upon specific religious traditions at all. Instead, this practice communicates the willingness of the community to be inclusive of diverse, authentic expression, and values the richness of diversity and difference.

CONCLUSION

Communication, engagement, sustainability, leadership, and diversity together represent a significant subset of the necessary practices of successful community. All are motivated by an understanding of the value of community. It may well be that for brief moments we can enjoy a mountaintop experience of community as though community was an achievable state rather than a process. But between those moments we must understand that the value we seek to enjoy and honor is of a process (inherently and humanly flawed) that can be pursued with integrity and joy. It is said that the famous jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, held the French philosopher, Malebranche, in especially high regard. In a speech late in his career, Holmes reflected on his own practice of law, how his life was a lifetime of practice and pursuit with no expectation that an ultimate state would ever be achieved. “It was of this that Malebranche was thinking,” said Holmes, “when he said that, if God held in one hand truth, and in the other hand the pursuit of truth, he would say: ‘Lord, the truth is for thee alone; give me the pursuit.’”