

Our Lost and Stolen Sense of Community

Ken Olson

Things have changed. In a time not long past, most people in America lived in communities. Embedded in that very word is the idea of a substantial sense of unity. That is now largely gone.

In communities, people felt free to communicate (another closely related term), i.e. to discuss all sorts of things, a necessity for meeting of mind, closeness of heart, and to counter isolation. In Ionesco's play *The Bald Soprano*, a man and woman happen to meet on a subway and engage in polite conversation. In the process, they find they have many things in common, including the fact that they each have two kids, boy and girl, that they live in the same neighborhood in a certain part of the city and, in fact, in the very same apartment building. Finally, they discover that they are husband and wife.

It's not easy to stay connected to others, even in normal times. But Donald Trump is an abnormal president, and no one has been less a uniter and more a divider than him. His pathological need is to have enemies, and he sees life as a seesaw: to be up, others must be put down, a mentality that kills community. Like old TV's Archie Bunker, he's seldom right but never in doubt and, unable to use rational thought to persuade, he resorts to bullying. Vitriol: that might sound like a hair care product, but it's what Trump spews as he "lashes out" daily.

The signal he sends to those outside his MAGA party translates to "You can join our cause, but if not, we will crush you!" For, while the party out of power was formerly regarded as the loyal opposition, he calls them "the enemy within." Of Democrats he recently said, "I really do. I hate them. ...because I really believe they hate our country." Those who simply disagree on issues are often labeled socialists, Marxists, communists, and traitors, revealing that he has not the slightest idea of what those words mean.

Thus, Trump's twisted mentality is an utterly unamerican virus that has brought out the worst in people, poisoned our common well, and stolen our essential unity. There is much to grieve over that loss of shared values, as Trump is now an invisible presence at every gathering,

social or otherwise. How many of us have said, “I thought I knew him/her?” How many families have been fractured? I hope not, but it may be that a generation, or more, will need to pass before there’s a realistic chance of having close-knit communities once again.

A sign posted in a Jewish seminary reads, “A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless, or it can be part of a great meaning.” We are meant to be connected to all the rest. We are meant to be in this together. An old tale has it that a judge imposed a fine of \$20 on a man who was guilty of petty theft. Next, he fined everyone else in the courtroom that same amount, this for living in a place where a person had to steal bread to feed his family and turned the collection over to him. If the story didn’t happen, it should have.

We have no idea how different and difficult life would be for any of us, if not for the happenstance of birth, the good fortune of escaping some tragedy, abuse, or medical condition, etc. Each of us could easily be an addict or jobless individual behind bars or a homeless person living on the sidewalk. Each of those is someone’s mother, father, son, or daughter. After all, a major point of the story of the Good Samaritan is that, beneath everything else that separates us, we are of one human family, and we need to act like it.

The Pilgrims who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 did so with the realization that to make things work in this New World they needed a profound sense of unity. Before they even set foot on land, their leader, the Puritan lawyer John Winthrop, summed up the spirit of caring that was expected of one and all: “We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our community as members of the same body.” Timely words, still.

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