Community

by John W. Gardner
From *On Leadership*

In some measure, what we think of as a failure of leadership on the contemporary scene may be traceable to a breakdown in the sense of community.

The Uprooted, Oscar Handlin's great book on the nineteenth-century immigrants to America, contains a moving account of the European peasant village from which so many began the long journey.[1]

Handlin wrote of the unchanging, intimately known physical setting; the road, the brook, fields and trees, the small cluster of houses, the smithy, the mill, the church, the burial ground. He described the seamless web of family, fellow villagers, land, religion, occupations, rights and duties. It was a world characterized by coherence and continuity, allegiance and the experience of being needed.

The breakdown of community is not a uniquely modern phenomenon. No doubt it occurred in the world of antiquity when the interaction of tribal cultures in an ancient city shook the faith of the tribesman, or when the tales of traders from distant places planted seeds of questioning in parochial minds.

But those were occasional happenings. With the Renaissance, the breakdown of communities began to be a common experience, not yet devastating, but common. By the time Emile Durkheim wrote his classic *Le Suicide* in 1897, the diagnosis was clear.[2] He spoke in the most lucid terms of the breakdown of traditional belief systems and social groups. And in our time we continue to see the weakening and collapse of communities of obligation and commitment.

The disintegration of communities and the loss of a sense of community are clearly detrimental to the accomplishment of group purpose. As I pointed out earlier, it is in communities that individual values are generated and regenerated. With the disintegration of communities comes disintegration of shared values-and "leadership of the sort we seek and respect" because there are demagogues, some of

them quite evil - Hitler is the prototype - who feed on social disintegration.

If leaders cannot find in their constituencies any base of shared values, principled leadership becomes nearly impossible. Leaders are community builders because they have to be. Cicero, in his essay "De Re Publica," wrote: "A people is not just any collection of human beings brought together in any sort of way but an assemblage of people ... associated in an agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good."

There is another reason that leaders benefit from social coherence. In our system, leaders expect of constituents or followers or lower-level leaders a great deal of participation and sharing of leadership tasks. Social disintegration diminishes the possibility of participation.

The impact of such disintegration on value systems is clear. In a healthy society the process of value generation goes on continuously in stable, face-to-face groups such as family, neighborhood and community. One must include school, church and workplace if they are, in fact, communities. Some are; some are not.

The community teaches. If it is healthy and coherent, the community impacts a coherent value system. If it is fragmented or sterile or degenerated, lessons are taught anyway—but not lessons that heal and strengthen. It is community and culture that hold the individual in a framework of values; when the framework disintegrates, individual value systems disintegrate.

We have seen all the disorders of men and women torn loose from the context of community and of shared values. Individuals often experience a loss of meaning, a sense of powerlessness. They lose the conviction that they can influence the events of their lives or the life of the community (noncommunity) in which they live. Some of the consequences are dealt with in a psychiatrist's office, some in the system of criminal justice. Drugs and alcohol claim their share.

In recent years we have been puzzled by a steady parade of intelligent, successful Americans who have destroyed their own careers through amoral or criminal acts-front ambitious public servants to greedy Wall Street figures. Gifted and richly rewarded, they overreached and brought themselves crashing down. A common assumption is that for a

price (money, power, feme, sensual pleasure) they betrayed their standards. The other possibility is that they did not have any standards to betray, that they were among the many contemporary individuals who had roots in no set of values, or have torn loose from their roots. A society afflicted with the disintegration of family and community will inevitably feed such gifted transgressors into the stream of our national life.

A great many of our contemporaries, left without moorings by the disintegration of group norms and torn from any context of shared obligations, have gotten drunk on self. We value the individual. We value individuality. Self-reliance, self-discipline, self-help are honored in our scheme of things. But we cannot respect the crazy celebration of self that one sees today.

Intellectuals of the 1960s created "Life is absurd." Life is indeed absurd when the web of community meaning is shredded, when belief systems are shattered, when there remains no embracing framework of values. Daniel Bell charges that in modernist culture "there are no sacred groves that cannot be trespassed upon or even trampled down."[3]

THE TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY

So where do we go from here? Stories of the traditional communities of nineteenth-century America or Europe evoke nostalgia, but we can never bring them back, and if we could they would prove hopelessly anachronistic.

The traditional community was relatively homogenous. We live with heterogeneity and must design communities to handle it.

The traditional community experienced virtually no change from one decade to the next, and resented the little that it did experience. We must design communities that can survive change and, when necessary, seek change.

The traditional community commonly demanded a high degree of conformity. Our communities must be pluralistic and adaptive, fostering individual freedom and responsibility within a framework of group obligation.

The traditional community was often unwelcoming to strangers, all too ready to reduce its communication with the external world. Hard realities require that present-day communities be in continuous touch with the outside world, and our system off values requires that they be inclusive.

The traditional community could boast generations off history and continuity. Few communities today can hope to enjoy any such heritage. They must continuously rebuild their shared culture, must consciously foster the norms and values that ensure their continued integrity.

The traditional community was typically small—and no doubt a sense of community thrives on smallness. But the organized systems in which most off us live out our lives are not small. Large cities, large corporations, even large schools and churches, must create smaller subsystems in which affiliation and loyalty are realities and the sense of belonging can flourish.

In short, much as we cherish the thought off the traditional community, we have to build anew, seeking to reincarnate some of the cherished values of the old communities in forms appropriate to contemporary social organization.

INGREDIENTS OF COMMUNITY

A glance at the contemporary scene reveals diverse kinds of communities. Most familiar to us are territorially bounded communities such as towns, suburbs and neighborhoods.

For centuries, however, there have also been dispersed communities. The eighteenth-century Jesuit missionary, Eusebio Kino, traveling alone though northern Mexico and through territory that is now Arizona, exploring, mapping, helping the Indians to diversify their agriculture, celebrating the Mass alone in the desert, never doubted that he was an integral part of the dispersed Jesuit community. Our Foreign Service, in its times off high morale, has been a dispersed community.

If a sense of community is to exist today, it will have to be nurtured in many diverse settings. One of the difficulties in creating a sense of community today is the sheer heterogeneity off almost any population one

deals with. Gone forever, except in a few out-of-the-mainstream localities, is the community in which a stable set of shared values rests on the even more stable bedrock of a single religious denomination, a single ethnic identity, and an unchallenged tradition. *Today we live with many faiths. We must nurture a framework of shared secular values (justice, respect for the individual, tolerance and so on) while leaving people free to honor diverse deeper faiths that undergird those values.*

Having visited innumerable schools, I concluded years ago that some were communities in the best sense of the word, while others were simply geographical locations where students gathered to perform specified tasks. Later the same diversity struck me with respect to congregations. And workplaces. And cities. What attributes made the difference? In seeking to answer that question, I was driven to think analytically about the ingredients of community.[4] The following list of ingredients is arguable. Consider it provisional, on the way to something better. The important thing at this stage is to get past the generalized idea of community to an understanding of what conditions make it real.

1. *Wholeness Incorporating Diversity.* A community is obviously less of a community if fragmentation of divisiveness exists-and if the rifts are deep, it is no community at all. Schools in which faculty and students carry on a kind of trench warfare, congregations divided into cliques, cities in which people of diverse ethnic origins form mutually hostile groups—these are obviously not healthy communities.

We expect and want diversity, and there is dissension in the best of communities. But vital communities face and resolve differences. Some cities have created special boards to deal with disputes between groups of citizens. Others have interracial councils or have made provisions for citizens from one segment of the community to know and work with citizens from other segments.

2. *A Shared Culture.* The possibility of wholeness is considerably enhanced if the community has a shared culture, that is, shared norms and values. If the community is lucky (and fewer and fewer are) it has a shared history and tradition. It has its symbols of group identify and its story, which it retells often. Social cohesion is advanced if the group's norms and values are explicit. Values that are never expressed are apt to be taken for granted and not adequately conveyed to young people and

newcomers. The well-functioning community provides many opportunities to express values in relevant action.

A healthy community affirms itself and builds morale through ceremonies that honor the symbols of shared identity and enable members to rededicate themselves to shared goals. This does not mean that they suppress internal criticism or deny their flaws. The community that cannot tolerate disagreement fails to meet the earlier criterion, "wholeness incorporating diversity."

3. *Good Internal Communication.* Members of a well-functioning community communicate freely with one another. There must be occasions when members gather; there must be provision for forums, and organizations willing to serve as meeting grounds. People have to believe that they can have their say. Each segment of the community must understand what the other segments need and want.

In cities much of the communication is through the media, and all civic leaders and institutions must urge the media toward responsible coverage. But it is a mistake to depend on the media alone. Civic leaders should create an information sharing network among a wide variety of institutions and organizations. Maximum use should be made of institutions that can serve as neutral conveners; for example, community foundations, community colleges, universities and churches. Leaders must combat "we-they" barriers that impede the free flow of communication within their membership.

4. *Caring, Trust, and Teamwork. A* good community nurtures its members and fosters an atmosphere of trust. Members deal with one another humanely, respect one another, and value the integrity of each person. They both protect and give a measure of autonomy to the individual. Everyone is included.

Such attitudes make it possible to work together on necessary common tasks. Undergirding the teamwork is an awareness by all that they need one another and must pool their talent, energy and resources. There is a feeling that when the team wins everybody wins.

It is necessary to add that a community can be too tightly knit, suppressing dissent and constraining the creativity off its members.

5. *Group Maintenance and Government.* A functioning community has institutional provisions for group maintenance or governing. In a

corporation it is the board of directors, management and the chain of command. In a college it is the trustees, administration, faculty council and student government. In a town or city it is not only the formal governing mechanisms but also the nongovernmental leadership exercised through various private sector institutions.

6. *Participation and the Sharing ofLeadership Tasks.* The healthy community encourages individual involvement in the pursuit of shared purposes. In cities, voter registration and voter turn-out are key indices. Cites can get significant nongovernmental participation through hearings, advisory boards and citizen commissions. Strong neighborhood groups are useful. A wide range of nonprofit civic groups and institutions can play a role.

It is not uncommon in our towns and cities today that the groups most involved in the affairs of the community all come from one or two segments of the community. All segments must participate.

Whether in a city or an organization, the possibility of effective participation is considerably increased if everyone is kept informed, and if individuals feel that they have a say. We must never forget that our conception of community involves the participation of mature and responsible individuals. We don't want community bought at the price of the individual's mindless submission to the group. *The good community finds a productive balance between individuality and group obligation.*

Everyone need not participate actively with respect to any given community. We must guard the right to participate while recognizing that some will choose not to do so. Individuals expending enormous energies holding their families together may be thankfully passive members of their church congregation. The individual who is an activist in the workplace community may be a passive member of the neighborhood association.

7. *Development of Young People.* The opportunities for individual growth are numerous and varied for all members. And the mature members ensure that the young grow up with a sense of obligation to the community. Beginning in elementary and high school, boys and girls should learn to take some responsibility for the well-being of any group they are in-a seemingly small step but without doubt the first step toward responsible community participation. And for that matter, the

first step in leadership development. On the playing field and in group activities in and out of school, teamwork can be learned. Through volunteer and intern experiences outside of school they learn how the adult world works and have the experience of serving their society. Every organization serving the community should find ways of involving young people.

8. *Links with the Outside World.* There is always a certain tension between the need for the community to draw boundaries to protest its integrity on the one hand, and the need to have fruitful links with the larger communities of which it is a part. The school, for example, must be in some respects a haven for its students, capable of shutting out some of the most destructive aspects of city life, but it can maintain itself as a strong institution only through extensive community relations and intelligent dealing with the school district and the state. A city must relate to its metropolitan area, the state, the nation and the world.

Skill in the building and rebuilding of community is not Just another of the innumerable requirements ofcontemporary leadership. It is one of the highest and most essential skills a leader can command.

Leadership Skills

I have touched on a considerable variety of leadership skills throughout this book. Which particular skills are required to deal with the fragmented world I have described in the last three chapters? Which skills are needed for an interdependent world where, as Jeff Luke puts it, *managing interconnectedness* is the basic task?[5]

Obviously, we need leaders who have some acquaintance with systems other than their own with which they must work. The day of the hard-shelled military leader who never bothers to understand civilians is over, as is the day of the hard-nosed business executive who never bothers to understand government, and the day of the leader who never bothers to think internationally.

Without proposing a definitive list, the following five skills seem to me to be critically important:

* Agreement Building. Leaders must have skills in conflict resolution, in mediation, in compromise, in coalition building. The capacity to build trust is essential to these activities, as are judgment and the political skills to deal with multiple constituencies.
* Networking. In a swiftly changing environment established linkages among institutions may no longer serve or may have been disrupted. Leaders must be skilled in creating or recreating the linkages necessary to get things done.
* Exercising Nonjurisdictional Power. In an earlier day, corporate leaders of government agency heads settled most matters through internal decisions; and they had the power to do so—power inherent in their institutional positions. The new leaders, dealing endlessly and on many fronts with groups over whom they have no jurisdiction, find that often the power of their institutional position simply is not decisive. They must know how to exercise the other legitimate forms of power—power of the media and of public opinion, the power of ideas, the power that accrues to those who understand how various systems work, and so on.
* Institutional Building. With problems so much more complex than they used to be, the leader's untutored good judgment no longer suffices. Even highly educated judgment no longer suffices. So, as I pointed out earlier, we construct systems, build problem-solving capability into them, and then choose leaders who can preside over the systems. Institutionalizing the leaders' tasks enhances continuity and predictability. As a general rule, we no longer want leaders to spend time coping with specific problems. Micromanagement is not the function of leaders. The task of leaders is to have a sense of where the whole system should be going and to institutionalize the problem solving that will get it there. The pace of change is such that leaders find themselves constantly rebuilding to meet altered circumstances.
* Flexibility. A year or so ago, I met with a group of Silicon Valley venture capitalists to hear their views on the

kind of leader/manager it takes to run the start-up companies in which they invest. At the end of the meeting I offered them a comparison. A few years earlier the officers of one of the biggest corporations in the world asked me to spend two days with their board, and I had the impression of immensely able officers piloting a huge ocean liner-a liner that set a steady course and held to it through the roughest seas. Now, as I listened to my Silicon Valley friends describe what it takes to lead one of their fast-moving companies, the image that sprang to mind was of someone steering a kayak through the perilous white water of the Salmon River. Flexibility is essential.

Endnotes

I.Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted (Boston: Little, Brown, 1952).

2.Emile Durkheim, Le Suicide (Paris: Alcan, 1897).

S.Daniel Bell, The Return of the Sacred? The Argument on the Future of Religion," British Journal of Sociology. 28, no.4b (December 1977).

4.In the explorations that I undertook before writing this section I was greatly aided by my friends Bruce Adams, Loren Mead, and John Parr.

S.Jeff S. Luke, "Managing Interconnectedness: The Need for Catalytic Leadership," Futures Research Quarterly. Winter 1986.