

The Meaning of Community

The early morning gang at the Lifeline gym arrives to the sounds of "Hey, you! Didn't come yesterday- You goofin' off again?" Some are there, for the opening of the door in the morning, to others, who arrive more leisurely, content in the knowledge of it being just like the last time that they were there; full of friends, laughter and good natured ribbing. The average age of the members is 50, with many on the older side.

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Community: it's curious where we find it. From the tongue clicking San tribes of Africa to the interwoven networks of families in India to the Lifeline Gym here in Maine, it exists as a living, breathing entity that feeds the spirits and the souls of people who belong to it.

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How sad it is to be lonely in a crowd? To be left out because of skin color, or religion, or language barriers- To be unlinked in a networked world?

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For me the word 'community' means to come together, to commune, in peace. It's something that brings joy, comfort and help. It's something that empowers and motivates, much like my Gym where a member feels comfortable chatting and exercising on a treadmill with their oxygen tank plugged in.

"It's a physical, emotional and a courageous place even," says Stephanie, a former instructor at the gym, while Skip the current instructor quips that "it's not the fanciest gym in town- So there must be some other reason, that people keep coming- again and again!"

Deleted: This is a physical, emotional and a courageous place even[quote?], says Stephanie, one of the instructors at the Gym, while the other instructor Skip, puts his own humorous cast on the place, making it an enjoyable non-threatening environment where people come to have their legs pulled, and laugh about it.

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Deleted: It's all just a community of caring, I guess, where everyone is accepted."

Andrew, a retired pastor finds it unbelievable that in this totally diverse group, no one assumes authority over anyone else. "I mean we can insult one another," he exclaims, "make fun of one another, and no one gets angry!"

Elizabeth, a former social worker at the Preble Street Shelter, speaks from personal experience when she says that "a community nurtures the human spirit, builds self esteem and good relationships that form the web of society." She observed this first in Kenya, where she lived in a poor community of villagers who she says, had hardly any wealth but were surprisingly happy- because they shared what they had.

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Deleted: a non-judgmental place where people found a community that they could then?? share with others like themselves[awkward]. She saw the difference that it made. To the extentquote?, she recalls, that people would keep a mailbox there, even though they could get mail elsewhere, because then when they got a letter, they would have someone to share that joy with.

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"A caring community is perhaps the difference between a well adjusted person and one who may strike out at the world because there is no one to listen to them," says Jerry, another regular at Lifeline. "You are always going to have instances of mental problems," he says, reflecting on the recent incidences of College shootings, "but if you have more of a community, you are able to spot them, you are able to care for those people, and able to do something about it."

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David Faulkner, director of Day One, a residential center for treatment of acute substance abuse problems in young adults, refers to his program as a therapeutic community, in which the members do everything together. Some of them when they graduate, end up going to college, something," he says, "they would have never been able to do otherwise."

Deleted: he says. [quote?]And most of them when they graduate are like totally different people, becoming more mature sometimes, than their contemporaries in the outside world.

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Curiously, on my last visit to India, Dr. Deepak Gupta, an established child psychologist in New Delhi, connected the increasing incidence of behavioral problems in society to India's economic reforms. "People are becoming increasingly busy, disturbed and stressed out," he said. Earlier, a society with more time, patience and larger extended families was able to understand and help children with minor problems, he says, but today, no one has the time."

As if to underscore his point, the next morning I wake up to the headlines of the first school shootings in the national capital region of New Delhi. Apparently, they occurred in an area undergoing a major breakdown in community because of its sudden wealth.

It is strange when I think back to my schooling in India. I could count on one hand the number of children I remember acting up in all those years.

Until next time, this is Charu Saxena from *The Meaning of Things* in Maine.

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