

Stages of Community-Making

by Scott Peck

Communities, like individuals, are unique. Still, we all share the human condition. So it is that groups assembled deliberately to form themselves into community routinely go through certain stages in the process. These stages, in order, are:

- Pseudocommunity
- Chaos
- Emptiness
- Community

Not every group that becomes a community follows this paradigm exactly. Communities that temporarily form in response to a crisis, for instance, may skip over one or more stages for the time being. I do not insist that community development occur by formula. But in the process of community-making by design, this is the natural, usual order of things.

Pseudocommunity

The first response of a group in seeking to form a community is most often to try to fake it. The members attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement. This attempt—this pretence of community—is what I term ‘pseudocommunity’. It never works.

The essential dynamic of pseudocommunity is conflict avoidance. The absence of conflict in the group is not by itself diagnostic. Genuine communities may experience lovely and sometimes lengthy periods free from conflict. But that is because they have learned to deal with conflict rather than avoid it. Pseudocommunity is conflict-avoiding; true community is conflict-resolving.

What is diagnostic of pseudocommunity is the minimisation, the lack of acknowledgement, or the ignoring of individual differences. Another characteristic is that members will let one another get away with blanket statements, they will nod in agreement, as if the speaker has uttered some universal truth. Indeed, the pressure to skirt any kind of disagreement may be so great that even the very experienced communicators in the group—who know perfectly well that speaking in generalities is destructive to genuine communication—may be inhibited from challenging what they know is wrong.

Once individual differences are not only allowed but encouraged to surface in some way, the group almost immediately moves to the second stage of community development: chaos.

Chaos

The chaos always centres around well-intentioned but misguided attempts to heal and convert. In the stage of chaos individual differences

are, unlike those in pseudocommunity, right out in the open. Only now, instead of trying to hide or ignore them, the group is attempting to obliterate them. Underlying the attempt to heal and convert is not so much the motive of love as the motive to make everyone normal—the motive to win, as members fight over whose norm might prevail.

The stage of chaos is a time of fighting and struggle. But that is not its essence. Frequently, fully developed communities will be required to fight and struggle. Only they have learned to do so effectively. The struggle during chaos is uncreative, unconstructive, boring. It has no grace or rhythm. The struggle is going nowhere, accomplishing nothing. It is no fun.

The proper resolution of chaos is not easy. Because it is both unproductive and unpleasant, it may seem that the group has degenerated from pseudocommunity into chaos. But chaos is not necessarily the worst place for a group to be. Fighting is far better than pretending you are not divided. It's painful but it's a beginning. You are aware that you need to move beyond your warring factions, and it's infinitely more hopeful than if you felt you didn't need to move at all.

Emptiness

There is only two ways out of chaos ... one is into organisation--but organisation is never community. The only other way is into and through emptiness.

The most common (and interrelated) barriers to communication that people need need to empty themselves of before they can enter genuine community are:

Expectations and preconceptions

Community building is an adventure, a going into the unknown. People are routinely terrified of the emptiness of the unknown ... Until such a time as we can empty ourselves of expectation and stop trying to fit others and our relationship with them into a preconceived mould we cannot really listen, hear, or experience.

Prejudice

More often unconscious than conscious, prejudice comes in two forms. One is judgements we make about people without any experience of them whatsoever. More common are the judgements we make about people on the basis of very brief, limited experience. One reason to distrust instant community is that community building requires time -- the time to have sufficient experience to become conscious of our prejudices and then to empty ourselves of them.

Ideology, theology, and solutions

Obviously we cannot move very far toward community with our fellow human beings when we are thinking and feeling (in terms of) ideological and theological rigidities that ... assume the status of 'the one and only right way'.

The need to heal, convert, fix or solve

Isn't it the loving thing to do to relieve your neighbour of her suffering or to help him to see the light? Actually, however, almost all attempts to convert and heal are not only naïve and ineffective but quite self-centred and self-

serving. It hurts me when my friend is in pain. My most basic motive when I strive to heal is to feel good myself ... there may be an opposite way: the appreciation and celebration of interpersonal differences.

The need to control

The need for control -- to ensure the desired outcome -- is at least partially rooted in the fear of failure. For me to empty myself of my over-controlling tendencies I must continually empty myself of this fear. I must be willing to fail.

The stage of emptiness in community development is a time of sacrifice. Such sacrifice hurts because it is a kind of death, the kind that is necessary for rebirth ... This is an extraordinary testament to the human spirit. What it means is that, given the right circumstances and knowledge of the rules, on a certain but very real level we human beings are able to die for each other.

Community

When its death has been completed, open and empty, the group enters community. In this final stage a soft quietness descends. It is a kind of peace. The room is bathed in peace. Then, quietly, a member begins to talk about herself. She is being vulnerable. She is speaking of the deepest part of herself. The group hangs on each word. No one realised she was capable of such eloquence.

When she finishes there is a hush. (Afterward:) Out of the silence another member begins to talk ... deeply; very personally ...

Then the next member speaks. And as it goes on, there will be a great deal of sadness and grief expressed; but there will also be much laughter and joy. And then something almost more singular happens. An extraordinary amount of healing and converting begins to occur -- now that no one is trying to convert or heal. And community has been born.

It is like falling in love. When they enter community, people in a very real sense do fall in love with one another en masse ...

Because I have spoken so glowingly of its virtues, some might conclude that life in community is easier or more comfortable than ordinary existence. It is not. But it is certainly lively, more intense. The agony is actually greater, but so is the joy ... life in community may touch upon something perhaps deeper than joy ... When I am with a group of human beings committed to hanging in there through both the agony and the joy of community, I have a dim sense that I am participating in a phenomenon for which there is only word. I almost hesitate to use it. the word is 'glory'.