BY JOANNA MACY

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ACTIVE HOPE

How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy

JOANNA MACY &
CHRIS JOHNSTONE

New World Library
Novato, California

people say, "Hearing you describe using this strength helps me recognize it in myself too." When other people open to their strengths, it can help us open to ours too. We can "catch" this type of power from each other.

Whenever you are struggling, remember the sword in the stone. Think of trying to pull it out. Then pause. Remember those who inspire you. Think of them around you, and draw on their strengths. Think of those who support and believe in you. Draw strength from them as well. Think of who and what you are acting for, and feel their power acting through you too.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Richer Experience of Community

There is an old folktale from Denmark about a meeting between two kings. "You see that tower," said the first king to the second, pointing to a tall, highly fortified part of his castle. "In my kingdom, I can command any of my subjects to climb to the top and then jump to their deaths. Such is my power that all will obey." The second king, who was visiting, looked around him and then pointed to a small, humble dwelling nearby. "In my kingdom," he said, "I can knock on the door of a house like that, and, in any town or village, I will be welcomed. Such is my power that I can stay overnight, sleeping well without any fear for my safety." The first king had power-over, and the second king had power-with. When we follow the path of partnership, a different quality of relationship emerges and, with this, a richer experience of community. In this chapter we'll look at fellowship and community as forms of wealth that enrich our lives, strengthen our security, and give us a more stable foundation from which to act.

The Epidemic of Loneliness

The term *community* is often used to describe those living in a specific location or having something in common such as a profession, activity, or ethnic background. But in modern urban environments, people can live in the same building yet still have no real connection

to one another. Commenting on the widespread lack of social cohesion in Western society, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck describes his experience of growing up in a New York apartment block:

> This building was the compact home for twenty-two families. I knew the last name of the family across the foyer. I never knew the first names of their children. I stepped foot in their apartment once in those seventeen years. I knew the last names of two other families in the building. I could not even address the remaining eighteen.[1]

The danger of being too comfortable, too self-sufficient, is that we lose any sense of needing one another. If each family has its own washing machine, electronic entertainment, and adequate supplies of food, what reason do we have to knock on our neighbors' doors? Experiencing need prompts people to reach out and make contact. That is why self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous have become such fertile expressions of community and fellowship. Through painful experience, their members have learned the truth of the maxim "I can't, we can." Crisis becomes a turning point when it provokes us to reach out to others.

Where do we look to meet our needs for security and a satisfying life? In the story of Business as Usual, the central plot is about personal advancement through economic success; the assumption is that we meet our needs through getting more and better stuff. This story leads people to invest time, resources, and attention in their own little bubbles rather than in their relationships and communities. In the United States, for example, the proportion of people with no one to confide in has nearly tripled in recent decades.[2] While materially richer, on average, than they were thirty years ago (with an increase in billionaires as well as people living below the poverty line), modern Americans are less likely to visit friends or be

visited by them.[3] Behind the locked doors lies an epidemic of loneliness that extends throughout the industrialized world.

Networks of mutual support bring many benefits, including reduced crime rates, higher levels of trust, lower suicide rates, a reduced risk of heart attacks, fewer strokes, and less depression.[4] Referred to as "social capital," the web of supportive relationships within a neighborhood is a form of wealth that improves the quality of our lives. Unfortunately, with the trend toward increased individualism and consumerism, this great treasure is in decline. The breakdown of communities is self-reinforcing: the more people retreat into their own private worlds, the more neighborhoods decline and the more people turn away from community involvement (see Fig. 7).

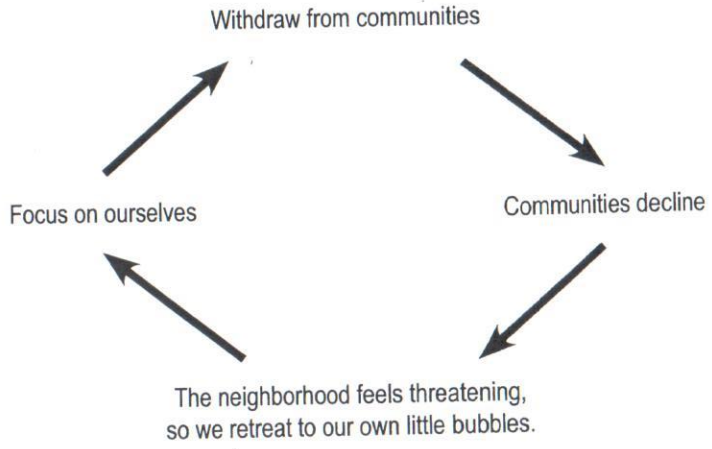

Figure 7. The vicious cycle of community erosion

A Different World Is Possible

Once in a while something occurs that sweeps away the isolation and mutual indifference so prevalent in modern society. Rebecca Solnit, in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, describes such a case:

> I landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, shortly after a big hurricane tore up the city in October of 2003. The man in charge of taking me around told me about the hurricane — not about the winds that roared at more than a hundred miles an hour and tore up trees, roofs, and telephone poles, or about the seas that rose nearly ten feet, but about the neighbors. He spoke of the few days when everything was disrupted, and he lit up with happiness as he did so. In his neighborhood all the people had come out of their houses to speak with each other, aid each other, improvise a community kitchen, make sure the elders were okay, and spend time together, no longer strangers.[5]

Our human tendency to pull together in emergency situations, even to risk our lives helping others, is well documented. In her study of human responses to disasters, Solnit describes how such rising to the occasion is more common than many suspect and more satisfying than many might imagine. Referring to her own experience of an earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1989, and the gratifying engagement she noticed in herself and others afterward, she writes:

> That sense of immersion in the moment and solidarity with others caused by the rupture in everyday life, an emotion graver than happiness but deeply positive. We don't even have a language for this emotion, in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear. We cannot welcome disaster, but we can value the responses, both practical and psychological.... Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility.[6]

When food appears reliably on our tables, we don't need to exercise our creativity or social intelligence to survive. It is different in a disaster. The closeness of danger activates our wits and our

cooperative tendencies in ways that bring out new levels of aliveness and community. When the shops are flooded and the system is in disarray, the helping hand of a neighbor or an improvised soup kitchen offer more security than status or money. As we reach out to help one another, our lives become more meaningful and satisfying. We discover that we don't thrive, or survive, alone. That's what Helena Norberg-Hodge saw in the Ladakhi villagers of northern India (see chapter 5); knowing that their survival depended on the land and people around them, they experienced their interdependence as the very foundation of their reality.

What comes into view when we see with new eyes is this interdependence. There is no such thing as a "self-made man" or a "self-made woman": while we play a role in making ourselves, we are also made by each other and our world. When hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes sweep away illusions of self-sufficiency, we're reminded how much we need one another, how much we depend not only on people but also on the larger web of life. We treat people with a different kind of respect when we consider that they might someday be pulling us out of the rubble. We treat the rest of life with a different kind of respect when we consider that without it, we wouldn't be here at all.

Familiar Bubbles Beginning to Burst

We don't have to wait for a natural disaster before opening to the rich experience of community described by Solnit and others. We see this opening in our workshops on a regular basis. As participants express their grief, dread, and outrage at the unraveling of our world, awareness grows that we are, all of us, living in a disaster zone. Hearing one another name the tragedy unfolding in our world reassures us that we're not alone in noticing. The expression of common concern builds community, as does our shared willingness to show up and respond.

In our workshops we often use an exercise called "the milling" in which participants move around the room and then stop to face each other in pairs. We invite them to consider the possibility that the person in front of them might become a victim of the unraveling we face. With environmentally linked cancers, nuclear warheads still poised for action, and an increase in climate-related disasters, such a possibility is a sad reality. We then ask participants to consider the possibility that the person they face might make a crucial contribution to the healing of our world. This too is a realistic possibility.

This process drops the veil of normality that screens out the very real perils we face. The bubble of Business as Usual dissolves for a moment. This exercise also acknowledges that each of us can make a pivotal contribution to our world. We can never know whether our actions will have a decisive impact. What we can know is that by supporting one another, we make this possibility more likely.

At the moment, the impact of the unraveling is unevenly distributed. While climate-related disasters have wrecked the lives of millions of people, there are many millions more who, from the comfort of their homes, don't believe there is much of a problem.

As the unraveling of our world proceeds, it becomes more difficult to hide from. Unfortunately, shared awareness of a problem does not inevitably cause people to come together as a community of mutual support. When the danger is only vaguely sensed and not understood, this can lead to distrust, hostility, and scapegoating. In adversity, people can pull together or push apart, step outside their bubbles or retreat further into them.

The way we understand power greatly influences which way we go. The more people and nations apply a power-over model, the more they rely on force to maintain positions of advantage. This

perspective fills the world with enemies against whom we must defend ourselves.

FOUR LEVELS OF COMMUNITY

The Shambhala warrior prophecy, recounted in chapter 5, describes a time of great danger where the hazards we face arise out of our relationships, habits, and priorities. The quest of the Shambhala warrior is to dismantle the mind-made weapons laying waste to our world.

The term *weapon* applies not only to armaments but also to destructive ways of thinking and acting. The pattern of thinking that divides humanity into us and them is something we can all play a role in dismantling. To do so, we use our two implements: compassion and insight into our interconnectivity with all life. These implements undo the thinking that creates enemies, leading us to community.

We can think of community as having different levels. Each progressively widens our sense of what we belong to, what we receive from, and what we act for. These levels are:

- groups we feel at home in
- the wider community around us
- the global community of humanity
- the Earth community of life

At each level, we can apply the implements of insight and compassion to dismantle the thinking that fragments our world and sets us against one another. The process of building community is self-reinforcing since not only does it contribute to the healing of our world, but it also enhances the quality of our lives. Like the second king in the Danish folktale, when we feel welcomed rather than threatened by those around us, we sleep more soundly at night. Let us look at each of these community levels in turn.

Groups We Feel at Home In

A group we feel at home in is small enough that we know one another's names and share common interests, even a common purpose. Feeling at home in such a group isn't always immediate; it can take time to build trust and a sense of ease. When we feel the bond of common cause and reciprocal support, we have a powerful setting for synergy.

We see this level of community at work in adventure stories in which a deeper purpose acts through a small group of central characters in a way that forges extraordinary loyalty between them. The bond among Harry, Hermione, and Ron in the Harry Potter stories grows out of their shared response to the grave danger they recognize. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo acts with allies in the "fellowship of the ring" to accomplish their mission, and the lengths his friends go to for one another create a tough, enduring sense of community. The same can happen in our lives when we act with others toward shared goals.

A group we feel at home in can support us through remarkable personal transformations. Our interactions change when we feel safe enough to let go of defensiveness, allowing us to become more open to one another and to life. Ian, a colleague, described his experience in a group committed to supporting its members in offering their best contribution to the world:

> I had found a place where I could make a contribution simply by showing up, and showing care for those who also showed up. Slowly I found my voice in the group. I felt supported; it was like finding nourishing soil in which to grow.

A kind of magic can happen in groups like this. The fellowship generated anchors and nourishes us. As a lone voice, we can feel drowned out by the constant broadcast of commercial reality and swept along by the rush of Business as Usual. Circles of fellowship create space for a different story to be heard, spoken, and lived. By providing a protected space to share our concerns and sprout new responses, they serve as seedbeds for the Great Turning.

Seeing with new eyes involves recognizing a story much bigger than our personal dramas. Doing so fosters a different type of interpersonal economics, with more generosity and understanding. Issues such as who's getting the best deal or who has the most status fade in importance in comparison with what we can achieve together. Acting as a group for the Great Turning elevates our friendships and graces them with new beauty. Such groups powerfully support our ability to bring healing and transformation to our world. As anthropologist Margaret Mead so famously said:

> Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

We need groups like this now and will need them all the more in the coming years. They give us a foundation of resilience that helps us adapt to changing circumstances, recover from setbacks, and find strengths in times of adversity. When conditions are difficult, having a trusted gang around us both to draw from and give to can make all the difference. Doris Haddock, the activist fondly known as Granny D, was ninety-eight years old when she gave a talk in Philadelphia describing how this sort of mutual support transformed her experience of the Great Depression:

> Maybe we were hungry sometimes, but did we starve? No, because we had our friends and family and the earth to sustain us.... We were fountains of creativity. We were fountains of friendship to our neighbors. As a nation, we were a mighty river of mutual support.[7]

The immediate circle in which we feel most at home is just the first rung of community. It is easy to build community with those who are like us and share our point of view. To dismantle the weapons laying waste to our world, however, we need to extend our community beyond this. We start with what is close and nourishing. But that is just the beginning.

The Wider Community around Us

In 1958 Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne was a young science teacher at a high school in Sri Lanka. In a remote poverty-stricken village, he organized a two-week work camp where he and his students helped the villagers identify pressing needs and work together in meeting them. The process of acting together and recognizing their own resources of strength and intelligence generated strong feelings of community. This initial effort eventually led to the emergence of a movement based on people working together to meet common needs. Called Sarvodaya Shramadana, a Sanskrit phrase meaning "the awakening of all through working together," this movement has spread across Sri Lanka to fifteen thousand villages.[8]

Sarvodaya applies the collaborative model of power-with, working on the principle that everyone can play a role and that everyone has something to offer. At community kitchens set up to tackle childhood malnutrition, all those present, including the children, are encouraged to contribute, even if they only bring some sticks for the fire. In offering their time, ideas, and energy, people grow respect for their own abilities and deepen their sense of community.

In one village, a water reservoir had needed repairing for more than fifteen years. The villagers had built up a thick file of their correspondence with local authorities requesting help. A work camp of local and visiting volunteers was organized by Sarvodaya to tackle the problem. The job was completed on the first day, and, at a celebration held in the village that evening, the file of letters was burned.

Sarvodaya challenges the view that our society's problems are beyond the power of ordinary people to address. By acting together, we make things possible that before had seemed impossible. Working collaboratively toward a common benefit can also be deeply satisfying because it transforms "work" into a social occasion. This principle was used to great effect with the barn raisings common in North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is applied today in a wealth of community-building projects around the world. The Transition movement, a global network of initiatives addressing community resilience, offers a good example.

As oil becomes less available and as fuel prices rise, the ensuing recession increases unemployment and financial stress. Eventually, we'll face an energy famine that threatens our industrial economy with collapse. If we don't have an alternative system in place to meet our basic needs, society is likely to break down into gangs fighting for food and other resources. The Transition movement focuses on developing strong and resilient communities that will be able to function when the oil age is over. For many communities around the world, the transition from oil dependence has already begun, and with it comes a renaissance of mutual aid.

A free booklet produced by Transition United States describes some simple initiatives that build community and save energy.[9] One is the "walking school bus" that has children walking to school in groups with one or more adults. This can be as informal as two or three families taking turns, or it can be more structured, with scheduled routes and trained volunteers. Another example is "permablitz," in which groups come together to transform one another's back- or front yards into gardens for growing food. Skills are shared, friends are made, and hard work is done with mutual enjoyment.

When viewed separately, initiatives like these might appear to

have limited impact. Yet their power is revealed when we consider what they are part of and what they move toward. Each time people come together in acts of mutual aid, whether it be digging gardens or raising barns, they contribute to a new version of what our world can look like. The Great Turning involves changing our culture, and that means changing our neighborhoods as well.

The Global Community of Humanity

Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested in 1963 for taking part in a nonviolent civil rights protest in Birmingham, Alabama. From his prison cell, he wrote a famous letter responding to criticism of the demonstration and the role of "outsiders" in it:

> I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly.[10]

"Outsider" involvement was criticized because of a belief that we should be concerned only with issues happening on our own doorsteps. Dr. King dismantled this assumption. We don't need to live geographically close to people in order to care about them or to take action on their behalf. What extends community is solidarity based on the two Shambhala warrior tools, compassion and insight into our interconnectedness. Distance does dull us, though. If children were starving outside our front door, it would be unnatural to ignore them. Yet throughout our world, ten children under the age of five die every minute because they don't have enough food to eat.[11]

To bring closer the realities of our deeply divided world, environmental scientist Donella Meadows calculated what a village of

a thousand people would look like if it reflected the composition of the world's population.[12] The wealthiest two hundred people would receive three quarters of the village's income, while the poorest two hundred would receive just 2 percent between them. A third of the village would lack access to safe drinking water; of the 670 who were adults, half would be illiterate. Each year, there would be twenty-eight births and ten deaths, one of these from cancer, and three from lack of food or safe drinking water. Only half the married couples would have access to modern contraceptives.

In 2005 the statistics from this "state of the village report" were updated, though they showed no improvement in the striking inequalities described fifteen years earlier in the first edition.[13] Our world village faces the pattern of overshoot and collapse looked at in chapter 1. Because freshwater is being extracted at a rate faster than it is replenished, wells around the village are drying up. Because the land is overfarmed and topsoil is being lost to erosion, the area of productive agricultural land is shrinking. Because of overfishing, stocks of many once-common species have either collapsed or are in sharp decline. Even without taking climate change into account, it is easy to see that we are heading for a crash.

If we lived in this village, would we see where we were headed? Would we pull together to address the challenges we face? Unfortunately, as reflected by our current global situation, the village would be divided into groups that see themselves as separate from, and in competition with, one another. A large share of the village wealth would be spent on military operations to keep resources in the hands of the richer groups within the village, some of whom would be in conflict with each other. As these resources became depleted, wars would be waged over remaining reserves.

Thinking back to the two Danish kings, we see that sending young people to death and dismemberment in war is not so different from ordering them to jump from a tall, fortified tower. In contrast,

the Great Turning is about creating the sort of global community where people are able to sleep at night without fear for their safety.

When Helena Norberg-Hodge first visited Ladakh in 1975, she was told by one of the villagers, "We don't have any poor people here."[14] She saw he was speaking the truth: everyone's basic needs certainly appeared well met. There were no very rich people either — not in a material way, at least. In terms of social capital, though, the Ladhakhi were among the wealthiest people she had ever known, and the happiest. They would sing together while bringing in the harvest. Their peacefulness was infectious. A phrase she kept hearing the villagers say was "we have to live together."[15] When a conflict arose, they would repeat this like a mantra and find a way of getting on. What would it be like if this were our mantra too?

We can choose between different types of wealth. The path of seeking material wealth beyond our basic needs sets us against one another. The greater a nation's appetite for resources, the more likely it is that it will go to war, and the more likely it is to tear up forests for open strip mines or to drill for oil deep below the ocean floor, wrecking marine habitats. The second type of wealth is what we see with new eyes. It is the community we find in mutual belonging.

The Earth Community of Life

Because she loved a river, Ali Howard swam almost 380 miles in twenty-eight days.[16] The rich ecosystems of the Skeena in Canada are threatened by Shell's plans to drill a thousand gas wells around the headwaters of this river. As the small, scattered gas deposits are buried within seams of coal, high-pressure water and chemicals would be pumped into the ground as part of the extraction process. The contaminated silt washed into local streams would threaten the spawning grounds of salmon not just in the Skeena but also in the nearby Nass and Stikine rivers too. To draw attention to the devastation these gas wells would bring, Ali swam the full length of the Skeena. Along her route, those living by the river came out to greet her, joining together in a newfound watershed identity.

Communities don't just involve humans; they include all that we belong to, feel part of, identify with, and act for. For Ali Howard, her community included the River Skeena itself and the rich ecology of plants, animals, and people within its watershed. When we stand up for a community, it is as though the community acts and speaks through us, making us its mouthpiece. Ali gave the Skeena someone to speak through.

This role, of speaking for our natural world, is crucial. If we don't, who will? Unless someone speaks for the salmon, the rivers, the wild spaces, and the rest of life, how will we stop the relentless drive of short-term profiteering that is turning our world into a wasteland? Our survival is at stake; we are only beginning to realize how ecosystems act together to maintain conditions favorable to humans. As James Lovelock, the leading scientist behind Gaia theory explains, "The natural world outside our farms and cities is not there as decoration but serves to regulate the chemistry and climate of the Earth, and the ecosystems are the organs of Gaia that enable her to maintain our habitable planet."[17]

An understanding of our interdependence with all life is found in the wisdom of many indigenous cultures. As the Mohawk Thanksgiving Prayer states, "we have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things."[18]

This duty is based on the recognition that without the interconnected web of ecosystems, we have no life. Yet we humans are living as if we were at war with the rest of nature, eliminating whole ecosystems and driving entire species to extinction. Of the species assessed in 2009 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), 17,921 were deemed to be at serious risk of extinction.[19] We just don't know what impact the loss of these

species would have, but activist and writer Duane Elgin offers a metaphor:

> Our extermination of other species has been compared to popping rivets out of the wings of an airplane in flight. How many rivets can the plane lose before it begins to fall apart catastrophically? How many species can our planet lose before we cross a critical threshold where the integrity of the web of life is so compromised that it begins to come apart, like an airplane that loses too many rivets and disintegrates?[20]

"We need to live together," the Ladhakhi villagers say. "Or we will not live at all" is the message modern biologists would add. To stop the extinctions, we need to declare peace with our world. For that peace to take root and grow, we need active reconciliation and community building.

In the mid-1980s, Joanna and John Seed developed a group process that strengthens our felt relationship with other life-forms. Called the Council of All Beings, it invites us to step aside from our human identity and speak on behalf of another form of life.[21] It can be an animal, a plant, or a feature of the environment — an otter, an ant, a redwood, or a mountain. We represent these life-forms at a gathering of beings who meet in council to report on the condition of our world. On one level we can see this as an improvised group drama, where we build empathy by looking through the eyes of another party. We could also approach this as a spiritual process, as a ritual inviting a shift in consciousness that allows another part of our world to speak through us. Either way, we are dropping our normal lenses and taking a perspective that sensitizes us to the needs and rights of other beings.

In preparation, we take time "to be chosen" by the life-form we will represent. Then, in silence, we make masks. At the appointed time, often announced with the beat of a drum, we join together in a circle and listen as each being speaks in turn.

When we speak on behalf of another life-form, a shift happens in our relationship with it. If we have spoken for ants or glaciers, bringing our imagination to bear in reporting their experience, they are no longer strangers to us. What emerges is a deepened appreciation of how they are affected by human activity, and with this, a sense of solidarity with them and a desire that they be well.

Like Arthur drawing on the strengths of creatures Merlin had sent him to spend time with, we can experience the beings we speak for as sources of support. Here Chris describes a time when this happened for him:

> *I was going through a difficult patch and sat down by a tree. I looked up and recognized the dark buds. It was Ash. I had been Ash and felt a sense of reunion with an old friend. Looking down, I saw Ivy. I had been Ivy too, at a different Council of All Beings. I felt supported by these two plants; I had a relationship with them I felt comforted by. My experiences of these councils have had a profound impact on my relationship with the life-forms I have represented. They have become significant as allies in my life. I wish to be an ally to them too.*

This is the fourth dimension of community, in which we feel welcomed by our world and supported by it. Feeling part of a much larger team can anchor and steady us through times of difficulty. When we have this "team spirit," we feel a heightened sense of spiritual connection with life.