

Creating Authentic Community

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The world desperately needs authentic community, not just as an appealing concept or occasional gathering of kindred spirits, but as a living reality that is firmly grounded in post-tribal cult-transcending integrity, intimacy, and practicality.

There is of course considerable personal and cultural resistance to this (but not necessarily to its surrogates!), resistance that must be thoroughly explored and understood before trying to establish such community. This resistance is rooted not only in the struggle between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group, but also in the often spectacular failures of so many so-called communities over the past 40 or so years. Later I'll say more about these failures, but for now let's look more deeply at individual versus group needs, beginning with the necessity of having a clearly and strongly established sense of personal autonomy.

If we don't have enough autonomy, we'll too easily be pulled by our craving to belong into any group that provides us with a sufficiently strong sense of belonging — and if we have too much autonomy (which manifests as an exaggerated independence) or are overly invested in it, we'll keep ourselves cut off from community, including the kind that could truly be beneficial for us. What this basically means is that we cannot be a healthily functioning part of a group if we have not done enough self-work so as to possess a firm yet adaptable autonomy. Put another way, we need to have developed a sense of self that cannot be seduced and that at the same time is capable of flexibility and even surrender under the right conditions. We must be able to give ourselves without giving ourselves away.

And more than healthy autonomy is necessary: We also need to possess a capacity for deep connection, communion, and intimacy. This is not arrived at by merely joining another or an organization, as many do by collapsing or abandoning their personal boundaries (in order to “be in relationship” or “fit in”). To go beyond codependency (however we-centered it might be), we must have developed the capacity to *expand* our boundaries so as to include the other; this means that we simultaneously maintain the integrity of our self and bring the other into relatively intimate communion with us.

Strong boundaries don't have to be rigid or impermeable. Without such boundaries, such a capacity to protect and honor our integrity of being, we will confuse connection with fusion,

integrity with allegiance, surrender with submission, and intimacy with romance. Again, deep work on oneself is essential. Enthusiasm is not enough. The surrender that is part of genuine communion does not mean bypassing or casting aside our autonomy (which would be a sign not of surrender, but of *submission*), but rather not losing touch with it even as we, consciously and discerningly, open our borders.

A capacity for *interpersonal* (or relational) intimacy is essential if we are to effectively function in a community. We must recognize that how close we can actually get to another depends upon more than the degree of inclusion; indiscriminately throwing open our borders invites not intimacy, but rather exploitation, delusion, and regret. A certain separation from the other may be needed, if only to bring that one into clearer focus.

Without such separation, intimacy becomes little more than fusion, exaggerated cohesion, a cult of two, a “we” estranged both from “I” and the collective “us” of humanity. In genuine intimacy, togetherness and apartness coexist, each honoring, illuminating, and embracing the other, as if in acknowledgment of the fact that they actually are fundamentally inseparable — we cannot separate unless we are already connected, and we cannot connect unless we are already separated.

And the capacity for *intrapersonal* (or occurring within the individual) intimacy is also essential if we are to effectively function in a community. In becoming intimate with all that we are — and therefore, to whatever degree, with all that is — we more and more deeply recognize who and what we really are. Instead of trying to get rid of what we don’t like about ourselves, we instead relate *to* it, and relate to it in such a way that it no longer obstructs our well-being.

That is, we choose relationship with our every quality — and I mean “our” in both a singular and collective sense — rather than separation. Intimacy then becomes more our passion than does transcendence, and relationship becomes not something to outgrow, but rather something to fully embody and live, especially as we realize, right to our core, that everything — *everything!* — exists through relationship.

There is, of course, much more to be said about intimacy in the context of community, but let’s now move on to looking, albeit briefly, at what actually happened to so many intentional communities since the 1960s. Most began with an inspiring vision, coupled with charismatic leadership and a devoted following. Principles of the highest sort were held aloft. A sense of creating (or being on the leading edge of creating) a truly viable alternative to conventional culture and the nuclear family gave community leaders and members a kind of pioneering high,

often in conjunction with an aura of being special and an us-versus-them mentality with regard to the surrounding culture. Abusive behavior often ran rampant, typically rationalized by community members as a “teaching” or “device” or “test” of some sort.

The more cultic such communities became (and therefore the more resistant to inside dissension and outside critical feedback), the less likely they were to see themselves thus. The shift from community to cult happened over and over again, even when the leaders of such communities preached against cultism. The trouble was, very few community leaders bothered to explore or even consider their own investment in having their community be a cult. It was far easier to rail against outsiders who called their community a cult, outsiders who of course could not possibly really get what was going on in such communities. So all the good happening in the community and all the good that the community was doing would be trotted out, conveniently obscuring or minimizing what was not working.

Hence a major consideration in the formation of authentic community is that of cultism. Yes, some degree of cultism is all but inevitable in even the most mature of groups, but it is less than a minor factor in such settings. It is crucial that those wanting to form an authentic community all have sufficient intimacy with their own cultic tendencies so as not to be seducible by them (this means, in part, doing some deep psychotherapy regarding their conditioning, in conjunction with fitting practices). My newsletter essay entitled “Found in the Toolkit for Operating a Cult,” (Issue 30, October 2007, www.robertmasters.com) describes in detail some of the key strategies that help keep cults in place; I recommend that you read it after you finish this essay.

Intentional communities in general are not conventional, at least in contemporary Western culture. Usually, they are obviously non-conventional, and this poses a perspectival problem — because for many people “non-conventional” simply means something regressive. Adding fuel to this bias is the fact that more than a few such communities were indeed regressive, self-consciously tribal, over-embracing and romanticizing various Eastern or indigenous cultures, making moral real estate out of cultivating a “oneness” with all things while at the same time reinforcing an us-versus-them mentality with regard to the community-at-large that surrounded them. But “non-conventional” can also mean *beyond* the conventional. Lumping together all non-conventional community-creating as something regressive, misguided, or immature is an unfortunate but commonplace error. A post-conventional community is not regressive, but progressive; it is not tribal, but trans-tribal; and it is *not* cultic.

Cultism *over separates* because it is a tightly encapsulated, self-obsessed us, with the rest of existence a rather distant *them*. Whatever caring exists within cultism — and it, however misguided, can be a very deep caring — is eventually impoverished by its isolation from the rest of Life. Initially, cults at best protect what is inside their walls, but sooner or later they become *guards rather than guardians*. Thus does the community-as-tribe become the community-as-cult.

Cults are also overly exclusive (through, for example, the teachings or beliefs to which members must adhere). Such exclusivity commonly plagues groups which have an excessively strong investment in staying and growing together. Absorption or infiltration by the community-at-large is usually avoided or resisted by such groups — social homogenization (with its compensatory designer individuality) being understandably less than popular — but often at the price of a tenaciously guarded impermeability or “justified” lack of responsiveness to “outsiders” who are clearly not sympathetic to the group’s ways. Thus do cults arise.

If the alienation, the painful sense of separateness or estrangement that so often drives us to seek membership *somewhere*, is not properly addressed, so that our yearning for togetherness is not just an escape from our sense of separateness or stranded-ness, then we’ll remain highly susceptible to the pull of various “parental” or “grounding” or “we have the answer” institutions and movements, including so-called communities.

It is easy to become over attached to whatever appears to provide for us. However, in becoming part of its “us,” we enter into an allegiance (to it) that actually reinforces the very separateness that first propelled us toward our particular “support” system. But what exactly is it that is being supported? Does the hand that feeds us expect us to convert to its faith or guidelines? Are we more likely to keep getting fed if we do? Is there an ulterior motive, and if so, do we see it, or do we even *want* to see it? Whatever is doing the giving needs to be exposed and illuminated.

How many organizations (including spiritual/growth communities) include — or even *want* to include — within themselves an *un-interfered-with* self-investigative branch, one that has consistently unimpeded access to resources *outside* the organization (such as persons who might bring the kind of criticism to that organization which could necessitate its dismantling or radical reorganization)?

What happens when the shelter that once gave us so much needed support becomes too tight or poor a fit? Do we then make ourselves wrong, assuming that there’s something *we* are doing that’s generating our restlessness or sense of cramped-ness, or do we instead challenge the

very structuring and foundational assumptions of such a shelter, no matter how convincingly our protests might be summarized as “resistance” or “our problem” or mere adolescent reactivity? Even the most supportive of groups can easily become stickily confining webs, entangling us in their expectations and morality.

Organizations usually tend to create and propagandize for whatever helps ensure their continuation — and if this is not clearly seen, cultism is all but inevitable.

I have gone on at some length about cultism, for if it is significantly present, authentic community simply won't happen. Let's return now to the tribalism (a tightly bound “we” over against the rest of humankind) that was (and often still is) common to so many intentional communities, “alternative” and otherwise. If it is simply taken as a given — which isn't difficult to do, for there are many attractive qualities to tribalism — the community will remain easy prey for cultic ambitions and practices. What is needed is not an extinguishing of tribalism, but rather a perspective and way of being that can include tribalism — or at least the best qualities of tribalism — without being reduced to it. Hence *post-tribal*.

There are things about tribalism (like the communal sharing of meals, work, schooling, and play) that can serve an authentic community. Tribalism emphasizes the group at the expense of the individual, but a post-tribal community does not, making sure that the balance between individual and group needs is an ongoing consideration, even when the balance necessarily has to swing to one side or the other. Tribalism takes us from being me-centered to we-centered, but it is a narrow, rigidly enclosed we.

The next step is far more inclusive, featuring a we-centeredness in which “we” arises in the fully collective sense, embracing all of humankind, without any ethnocentrism. This is the beginning of authentic community. As the shift occurs from we-centered (even at its best) to being-centered, authentic community takes real root and flourishes. (Note: It's important to realize that being-centeredness does *not* mean the extinguishing of we-centeredness, but rather *includes* we-centeredness without, however, being confined to its operational level.)

And now on to community leadership: Just as ships need captains, so too do communities need leaders. Unfortunately, many of the leaders of “alternative” communities did far more than captain their crew, assuming an excessive authority. This is not the place to revisit their failures and blindness to their own motives, since this has been lavishly exposed and commented upon by many sources, including the mainstream media. There have been many gurus with fallen haloes and pants; many spiritual teachers with the most far-fetched of excuses spiritually rationalizing

behavior that by almost any standard is aberrant. It's a long list, with debates still raging between those who won't criticize particular teachers and those who will. It's not really a stalemate, but might as well be, given the ongoing lack of resolution in such arguments.

What qualities might characterize the leaders of authentic communities? Here's a partial list, in no particular order: (1) Zero interest in (and zero support of) cultism and its payoffs; (2) No ambition to be the leader; (3) A deep and abiding capacity for being-centered relatedness, as shown by consistently demonstrated integrity and compassion, along with an ability to get to the heart of the matter efficiently and effectively; (4) Exceptionally effective in working with groups, without in any way marginalizing or otherwise shortchanging individual work; (5) Willing and able to see their own flaws; (6) Deep receptivity to inside dissension and outside critical feedback, coupled with a willingness to make good use of such information as soon as possible; (6) An ongoing exposure and uprooting of any cultism, in conjunction with supporting fitting personal work, psychotherapeutic and otherwise, for any members stuck in cultism or other life-negating patterns; (7) No grandiosity, no self-aggrandizement, no exaggerated promises, no arrogance, no bypassing of responsibility, no bullshit; (8) Either in a deeply committed being-centered relationship (as epitomized by mature monogamy) or fully capable of being in such a relationship; (9) Squeaky clean sexual energy, unpolluted by any pornographic or exploitive or otherwise immature erotic tendencies; (10) Fully and obviously committed to their own healing and awakening; and (11) Openness to their community evolving, even if it means their position becomes obsolete or that the community disintegrates.

Authentic community is more than just a good idea. It asks for much more than mere idealism. A group of individuals enthused about authentic community cannot form it just because the notion of it appeals to them; to truly form it, they would have to *already* be deeply engaged in self-work, to the point where they had become incapable of cultic behavior. Authentic community is not a haven for cultism. It is simultaneously a crucible and a sanctuary for deep work (both inner, relational, and cultural) and transformation, providing optimal conditions for awakening from our entrapping dreams.

In such a community, members would not allow each other to get away with neurotic behavior (including that which characterizes the inner workings of cults), but would instead challenge each other to more fully enter and embody the deeper life for which they yearned. There would be plenty of compassion, a compassion quite capable of fierceness when necessary. Everyone would support everyone else's healing and awakening and transition into a deeper life, generating a sense of "us" that didn't exclude those not living in such a setting. This stage of

“us” makes possible an even more clearly articulated, embodied, and fully functional individuality. However, as wonderful as this all might sound, it is — especially in its beginning stages — not an easy undertaking, existing far beyond the romanticizing of community to which many still fall prey.

In authentic community, we don't so much find liberation from limitation, as we do *through* limitation. This begins with us becoming *intimate* with all of our various aspects, so that the *inner* community that they constitute works as an optimally functioning whole. Without such integration, we'll go into *outer* community expecting it to make us whole. Many of us have lived in intentional communities (whether as leaders or members), but without sufficient maturity to make them really work. A group of individuals who are *already* whole — and who therefore are already operating from an integrally-informed consciousness — and who strongly desire to awaken further and be of genuine service through an on-going intimate association with kindred spirits, is the necessary prelude to authentic community.

May we open ourselves as fully as we can to the possibility of authentic community.
It is time.

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