

Tom Sargent

On Building an Intentional Community

The almost consistent failure of efforts to build intentional communities argues for care. Selecting any of the free varieties of organizational structure, or non-structure, results in great reduction of motivation. Members seem unwilling or unable to maintain the consistent drive necessary to maintain a community against the many forms of failure.

Traditional forms of community, in sharp contrast, seem to weather all efforts to change or destroy. Motivation is strong and durable. Often even a majority will cannot stop the ongoing senseless process of a traditional community.

This is no different from the ongoing senseless patterns of behavior we all find ourselves involved in from time to time. To be sure, some are distressing, others born in distress. But there are some very seductive patterns which are neither born of distress nor distressing.

Just as we learned to stand when we were very small, and still happily use that pattern now, so we learned to relate. We learned to bask in the warmth of the approval of the Big people. We learned to fear and escape the power of the big people when we displeased them. We learned the free feeling of doing the opposite of what the Big People want, even though it isn't free. All around us are the subtle and the obvious pressures of relating, that determine how we shall relate, what form our relating shall take.

When we decide to build a community, we use patterns that we learned when we were Little People relating to Big People. We will find a strong leader to please, cry for a protector and decision maker in a crisis. If there is no Big Person to please or rebel against, we will act seldom or not at all, and not for long, because there is no warm basking in the sun of approval or sipping the pleasure of rebellious freedom. The major motivators of any extensive human behavior seem to be the rewards we used to get when we were children. The question is, can I in fact choose to relate at all, or for any significant time, on a free person to person basis? Can I relate to many at once in a community, and, most important, can I weather a crisis with them, in the absence of the motivators of my childhood? Are there other motivators?

More specifically; Can we live as a community and feel secure without having to bask in the approval of a Big Person? Can we feel independent and free without having to rebel? Can we feel accomplished, strong, grown up without having to parent and take care of others? Can we feel one with our peers without having to conform to their requirements or have them conform to ours?

The answer is a resounding YES.

People in Co-counselling International, people in Alcoholics Anonymous, the people we work with at Change Agents in Hartford, Connecticut, and many others have chosen a specific and effective way to develop this alternative. They have discovered that free and intentional behavior is the result of a strong and highly regarded ME. That is the only alternative to behavior controlled by the patterns learned as a child. The celebration of my ME is strangely contradictory. An intentional community can only exist when its members act for their own individual ends. As A.A. says, it is a 'selfish' program. These communities are made of people who dare to act on their own for their own best interests.

These persons are willing to do the work of exploring their MEs. They will risk exposing their MEs. Together in a community they are willing to respond to their immediate real needs and not to behavior that is determined by patterns that may have been useful in another age.

The person who has discovered such a ME can live in a community and feel safe basking in the warm glow of his own self awareness. His strong ME feels free and independent without having to rebel or play win-lose. He feels accomplished and grown-up without having to take care of or parent another. This growing and changing ME delights in sharing the richness of differences with other MEs. The sense of unity is achieved through the celebration of our differences.

This is the way of life that many of us in Co-counselling International enjoy. It appears simple and easy. It's hard. For some of us it is the hardest thing we have ever done. It is not impossible. It is, finally, ONLY hard.

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