THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY: DECLINE AND RESTORATION

by

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America is nearing a crossroads! We may choose to continue traveling along our present path toward mediocrity and national crisis. Or we may, and should, choose a new path toward structural innovation and reform, one which will help realize the high ideals of our social values and cultural heritage.

Some of my colleagues in sociology believe that even now we are in the early phases of a revolution, violent and destructive, born of the belief that many of our institutions are no longer legitimate. Viable democracy requires that the public grant it credibility; and when legitimacy is absent, chaos and anarchy must be anticipated. Thus in recent years we have experienced record increases in delinquency and crime; shocking riots have occurred; welfare dependency and unemployment have risen at historic rates. At present “discouraged workers”—unemployed and underemployed persons, the overqualified, part-timers and “temps,” contract nomads and laborers without benefits, the seasonally or intermittently employed, the minimum-wage-earners—make up forty percent of the American labor force (Gwynn). Meanwhile, our educated middle class takes refuge behind barred windows and privacy fences, its wealth secured by burglar alarms. It finds its social outlets in special-interest groups and the “virtual communities” of the Internet.

Our predicament reminds me of the Fram Oil Filter Man who used to tell us on TV, “You can pay me now, or pay me later!” We can pay now in reforms which foster democracy, freedom, employment, and community; or we can pay later by investing further in the repressive machinery of government—employing thousands of new policemen, building yet more prisons, and meanwhile permitting significant erosion of our shared rights and freedoms.

The establishment of real, genuinely reciprocal communities in America requires that we rethink least seven features of our
present society. Concerning three of these, a consensus is already developing that broad societal adjustments are necessary. We need, first, to revise our educational institutions; second, to recover our community values; and third, to revive—and finance—our nearly dormant spirit of voluntarism. In regard to the four other issues, the necessity for change has not yet been generally acknowledged. Undertaking these latter reforms would require our rethinking some basic cultural assumptions and would result in social structures radically different from those we know. The four additional areas for reform are retreat from the ultimately destructive mentality that underlies “rugged individualism”; recognition that the modern free market, if left untethered by the powerful restraints of social value, is antithetical to true community; formulation of ways to recognize tangibly the social value of our activities, thereby adjusting the balance between capitalistic behavior and societal well-being; and finally, introduction of new social structures to help make possible the “community realized.” I shall discuss these seven areas for social action one-by-one, focusing more closely on the four latter imperatives.

First, then, education! Briefly but emphatically—we must reform our entire educational system so that “humanization” processes form part of the curriculum from kindergarten through graduate school. This shift of focus would signal an end to our over-zealous emphasis on technical specialization and formalistic “credentialing,” which stunts intellectual growth. We must foster self-discovery, self-actualization, and the commitment to serve others.

Next, in order to recover our community values, we must learn again to live as mature Americans. In the adolescent cultural limbo of the present, we are locked into value-hypocrisy. Our social structures and institutions do not carry our highest values into the routines of everyday life. Leading scholars including Amitai Etzioni, John W. Gardner, Robert N. Bellah, and b. f. maiz have all registered concern over our loss of community values. In a recent lecture at Fairmont State College, b. f. maiz, an authority on Martin Luther King, spoke of our need to re-learn cooperation and reciprocity. Dr. King taught us that the exclusion of persons because of their race or ethnic background—we could add class and gender—is poison to communities; that violence, whether used by the powerful to exclude the poor, or by the disenfranchised themselves to gain respect and inclusion, is a doomed strategy. King encouraged us to practice
human decency. We need to do as he taught, choosing kindness and cooperation over what Bellah sees as mean-spirited individualism, or what Etzioni has termed an “unwholesome pluralism” (217). The values for us to draw upon are readily available. John W. Gardner, founder of Common Cause, has identified a core of five secular human values with a viability so abiding that they seem to transcend culture, society, and time. They are justice, liberty, equal opportunity, individual dignity, and tolerance. According to Gardner these values can help unite us, leading to communities of “wholeness incorporating diversity” in which all may thrive (Kidder).

My own experience and research lead me to believe that three additional elements deserve inclusion in a listing of essential values. They are freedom, democracy, and work. But, as behavioral psychology teaches, values and attitudes are best formed in controlled environments, within structures promoting changed behaviors—financial incentives for preferred activity, for instance. Sadly enough, rewards for the performance of pro-social or community-strengthening behavior are rare, especially for contributions made near America’s grass roots. We must find tangible ways to recognize the value of citizens who help their fellow community members live decently and with dignity.

Children, of course, are the “modeling clay” of community values. Parents—both of them!—must be profoundly involved in bringing up their offspring. The family is a specialized micro-community within the macro-community; and as families go, so goes our nation. We must end the process which, during the past thirty years of “making it,” has devalued our children. As Etzioni writes, we must return to a situation “in which committed parenting is an honorable vocation” (64). The time has come for a redirection of public funds toward socially productive households, and especially toward families devastated by poverty, unemployment, inadequate benefits and other distribution deficiencies.

In addition to parenting, other institutions such as churches, senior citizen centers, and even neighborhood grocery stores perform vital social functions. Etzioni points out that a black neighborhood on the south side of Chicago “declined further when it lost its local shops to impersonal and remote shopping malls” (136). In this regard, “efficiency” measures such as school consolidations should not be initiated until an encompassing analysis of the affected...
neighborhood schools has been performed, weighing the moral and social consequences of consolidation equally against the benefits of projected financial savings.

Noting that contemporary children come to school “with their characters underdeveloped and without a firm commitment to values” (89), Etzioni suggests that we establish communitarian schools which promote character formation and moral commitment. Whose values do we teach? Recalling the enumeration by John Gardner, should we not seek to transmit especially those principles about which a consensus is achievable? We need not be afraid of dialogue on the matter of moral values, according to Etzioni; let students learn several sides of an issue. After all, exchanges of views enhance understanding and tolerance—the latter of which, we may recall, is one of Gardner’s five universal secular human values. Debate may demonstrate both the painfulness of conflict and the triumph of forging a genuine consensus. Etzioni adds that in building moral commitments our schools should rely mainly upon experiences, not lectures. Extracurricular activities such as organized sports are excellent for this purpose. They can deliver the message that “teams” win, that “hot dogs” lose, and that shared effort yields collective rewards (103).

Etzioni’s book under discussion here is entitled The Spirit of Community. In it he calls for a true “Progressive” movement to achieve genuine, anti-classist democracy in America. He surveys the kinds of reforms that could be achieved within existing social arrangements and institutions, such as the financing of congressional elections with public funds, the imposition of a total ban on political action committees or PACs, and the revamping of political parties. Certainly, changes like these may help revitalize democracy. Yet, while they do complement the structural innovations we need, they do not address the sweeping and dynamic reforms in the distribution of resources by moral means which would put the fundamental interests of our society into proper priority.

More constructive, at least in theory, is Etzioni’s discussion of pluralism, in which he identifies two types, rejecting one and advocating the other. “Each community,” he writes, “is made up of many different groups—farmers and city dwellers, owners, workers, consumers, and so on—each of which has particular interests it holds dear. Unbounded or unwholesome pluralism, which is anti-
thetical to community, takes place when these groups vie selfishly
to gain all they can, with no concern for shared community needs.”
The second type, which Etzioni terms “pluralism-within-unity,” is a
construct based upon principles quite similar to John W. Gardner’s
notion of “wholeness incorporating diversity.” This kind of plural-
ism permits groups to vie with one another for limited rewards, but
when the competition threatens to impinge upon their common
interests the system requires that they voluntarily restrain them-
selves, thus protecting the community (217). Etzioni’s latter concept
is attractive in the abstract, but unfortunately his presentation of it is
weakened by the absence of suitably articulated reforms and social
structures that would give it practical reality.

This brings us back to our list of seven reforms—and to a third
urgent need. We must encourage volunteerism in solving social
problems. We especially need to increase our financial support of
non-profit voluntary associations and agencies, as well as of indi-
vidual service volunteers. These groups and individuals have
assisted millions of disenfranchised Americans; and with adequate
funding, the great good already being done could be enormously
expanded. Through voluntary programs—more, perhaps, than through
any others—we can hope to bring back persons once discarded by
society and to re-empower them in a resurgent community.

But what can we do about rampant individualism, the fourth
of the social ills and dangerous cultural biases requiring correction?
In order to understand how sinister America’s deep-rooted fond-
ness for individualism really is, it may be helpful to begin with the
insights of Robert N. Bellah in his suggestive book, Habits of the
Heart. Bellah’s researchers conducted interviews across the nation
to explore contemporary notions of individuality. In the process
they became convinced that modern American society has repudi-
ated its colonial heritage of family, church and polity. “Gradually it
became clear,” Bellah reports, “that every social obligation was
vulnerable, every tie between individuals fragile. . . . Ontological
individualism has replaced them with the idea that the individual is
the only firm reality [italics mine].” The American commitment to
radical individualism, Bellah believes, established itself during the
frontier period when the literal distance of one man from others
seemed to offer settlers “the key to a marvelous future of unlimited
possibility” (276). But as Bellah notes, this promise based upon
separation in space has almost disappeared; and if we are to con-
continue enjoying the benefits of individual liberty and enlightenment, we must experience “a renewal of commitment and community” (277). Otherwise unrestrained individuation and separateness will surely end in societal self-destruction or be turned, with a vengeance, into their own dark opposites—fascism and communism.

In Bellah’s view popular culture, especially television, “makes a virtue of lacking all qualitative distinctions.” Intellectual culture, including the contemporary academy with all its compartmentalized, credentializing disciplines, is no more helpful, for it fails to say anything substantial about the larger issues of human existence. How, then, asks Bellah, does our culture manage to hold together at all? He answers that we follow one of two avenues toward realizing a semblance of mutual integration. The first is the “American Dream” of personal success. Consumed by ambition, we recognize the same compulsion in others—to whom we are therefore related but also, in a real sense, separated through our efforts to compete. The second source of ostensible community is our taste for the portrayal of vivid personal feelings. Television, our prime source of pseudo-integration, focuses mostly on how people feel. What people think, Bellah observes, “might separate us, but how they feel draws us together” (281).

Cultivating our individuation leads to what Erich Fromm the great psychoanalyst termed “negative freedom” (99). Freedom of this sort is negative because it permits individuals who “get a leg up” on others in wealth and power to monopolize the key resources that we must all depend on. And this is only part of the story. Individuals who have accumulated more resources than they require soon discover that their material success may be further enhanced by the success of the corporations that employ them. Thus, money and power—defying gravity!—flow uphill in our economy, so that a small number of increasingly wealthy and powerful individuals comprise the ranks of privilege. Successful themselves, they revel in the notion of America as a “land of opportunity” where, through hard work, persistence, and efficiency of effort, private citizens may attain the station of kings.

This entire process, a scenario of “negative freedom” in action, runs counter to the spirit of community. The price we pay in poverty, unemployment, and suffering so that the fortunate few may sentimentally rationalize their own condition is too great and
no longer acceptable. As Michael Harrington stated in *The Other America* thirty years ago, “In a nation with a technology that could provide every citizen with a decent life, it is an outrage and a scandal that there should be such social misery” (224).

Erich Fromm pointed out that while “negative freedom” has become common throughout the history of western civilization, “positive freedom,” or that which derives from the “full realization of the individual’s potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously,” is rare (270). Why should this be so? Whatever the answer, I submit that freedom of this kind is part and parcel of the reciprocal communities I advocate. In a review of *The Good Society*, another work by Robert Bellah, Lawrence J. Goodrich summarized what he believed to be the key arguments for and against individualism. Goodrich concluded that the individualism of John Locke, the philosophy that underlies the Declaration of Independence, no longer provides an adequate conceptual basis for dealing with our social difficulties. Hampered by a kind of tunnel vision in regard to the social consequences of his ideology, Locke justified the private individual’s appropriation of property on too narrow a ground. In Locke’s view government becomes a tacit collaborator in the acquisitive process, foregoing the exercise of regulatory power which might otherwise affirm social value. This is why Bellah believes that the creation of a “good society” in our country requires formulation of a new public philosophy—one “less trapped in the clichés of rugged individualism and more open to our invigorating, fulfilling sense of social responsibility” (quoted in Goodrich).

In his influential book *The Different Drum*, the social psychologist M. Scott Peck concurs with Bellah’s assessment of rugged individualism. On the positive side, Peck finds implicit in that concept an ethic fostering personal autonomy, independence in achieving one’s goals, and mastery over one’s own destiny. Still, by itself individualism ignores the mutual interdependence of people. A healthy community-building process, Peck says, breaks through the facade of composure we all wear as rugged individualists. It makes possible a variety of genuine communication which we find missing in most of our social interchanges. It challenges the superficiality of small talk and mere politeness, encourages healthy conflict, and embraces what Peck terms “emptiness,” a precondition for community. Peck does not condemn individualism outright; rather,
he advocates a modified variety capable of coexisting with relatedness. Tempered self-reliance of this sort encourages persons to empty themselves of barriers to communication such as seemingly undebatable beliefs, assumptions, feelings, and motives—personal baggage that tends to be arbitrary and, as Peck puts it, “impervious as billiard balls” (95).

Peck describes the community-building process as consisting of four stages: pseudo-community, chaos, emptiness, and community. The initial condition, pseudo-community, is at root a dishonest phenomenon. Members of a group who come together to solve a common problem may not recognize it, but they are bringing with them only a pretense of community. They keep their true feelings to themselves and cover disagreements with “little white lies” (88). They try to avoid conflict—believing, falsely, that it would frustrate the effort to work together.

In the chaos phase of community building, individual differences come out into the open and are tested against each other. Whose norm will prevail? Participants may ask themselves, “Can I win the day with my power, my persuasiveness?” A perceived vacuum of leadership may become evident and the group facilitator be attacked for want of decisiveness and authority. “Secondary leaders” now emerge to fill the leadership void, and this produces a temporary regression into imposed organization. Authoritarian leadership is, of course, incompatible with community; for as Peck wryly observes, “Committees and chairpersons do not a community make” (93). The chaos stage may be unpleasant and even painful, but it is a necessary step in bridging the gap between pseudo-community and true community.

The transitional state that follows is “emptiness.” (Peck’s account at this point suggests concepts we have met with earlier, Etzioni’s “pluralism within unity” and Gardner’s “wholeness incorporating diversity.”) If, confronted by chaos, the group can resist the powerful tendency toward reactive re-organization and instead embrace the challenging adventure of emptiness, its reward will be community. Emptiness requires that we set aside for a time the desire to “solve” our interpersonal differences. We cease trying to win the others over to our own idea or point of view. Empty of all our fine proposals, we come to know one another as human beings—as different human beings. At this juncture the group, stripped
of barriers to communication, moves “open and empty” into community. Members may now speak “very deeply, very personally” about themselves, Peck notes. In the shared act of expressing one’s humanity to others and the mutual recognition of individual differences, community is born. Only now can the task of problem-solving move forward with intensity and joy.

Peck warns that maintaining the gains achieved during this arduous process will be difficult and that, in a society characterized by so many forms of stress, groups may need to pass through the four stages many times (136). But new structures and reforms seem to hold the potential for reducing or even neutralizing these tensions by giving community-building “value parity” with market-based rewards and satisfactions.

Richard Lichtman, in his compelling essay Toward Community, focuses on the fifth item in our list of reforms: the inadequacy of the modern free market economy in fostering community. “Welfare liberalism, the current variety of capitalism, is ill-suited to the demands of a humane society,” Lichtman writes (2). He holds that the capitalist market, as it is presently constituted and regulated, cannot bring equality, justice or community to American life. Moreover, he warns against the proposed solution of returning to laissez-faire capitalism, with its detached reliance on pure market forces. Because he considers the purely economic theory of market competition as defective in itself, he submits that it “cannot legitimately promise to satisfy human requirements even in a social environment perfectly in tune with its own assumptions” (5). Some persons like to believe that society thrives best when governed least—that is, when simply left to pursue its own course. In this view, social value is material, resulting solely from the expenditure of labor upon raw resources. Such value is produced without outside intervention yet, magically, it somehow serves the overall public good. Lichtman urges us not to believe this fanciful oversimplification. Justice and the public good belong solely to the realm of social value, and they must inevitably be distorted by identification with market efficiency—an entirely different sort of value. Consider the human cost of this unnatural association!

In my view, the weaknesses of laissez-faire capitalism and its modern counterpart, welfare liberalism, are largely the same. The market is the market, regardless of the government’s role as a
regulatory or redistribution vehicle. Those who favor increased federal regulation suppose that partial redistribution of profits can satisfactorily address issues such as health care, poverty, and unemployment. Thanks to them, we have today a system of grudging welfare capitalism that is disposed to share as few of its benefits as possible with those who cannot or will not participate in the competitive market system. The failure in practice of the *laissez-faire* model seems to have elicited a strained yet uncomprehending and inadequate apology— as if for some slight imperfection in an otherwise flawless free enterprise system.

In modern society, persons are valued not for their humanity but quantitatively, in accordance with the jobs they hold. Lichtman notes that only by ignoring what is distinctly human in human efforts can the market system impose on those efforts its characteristic measure of value—price. But adherence to this scale transforms persons into mere market variables. Lichtman concludes that the market “fails grievously as an instrument for achieving human well-being” because a significant dimension of economic well-being is in fact “inherently social and cannot be atomized and assigned to individual units” (7).

The failure of the market to respond adequately to important social needs derives, according to Lichtman, from three causes. The first is its inability to identify *negative concern*. This means that when we want something “not to happen” the market is not responsive. For example, it does nothing to deal with the problems of poverty, or unemployment, or the need for cultural preservation. On the other hand, political decisions do have qualitative bases and do permit us to deal effectively with negative concern. The second reason for the market’s inefficency as a tool to promote social well-being is that it “cannot accommodate the preferences of future generations.” And the third cause is also, perhaps, the most basic. As Lichtman expresses it, “the market is opaque to social value” (12). Its inability to sense what transpires in the domain of social concern is a permanent limitation.

Lichtman identifies several kinds of social value, all invisible from a market-based point of view. Among these are *common values*, such as roads, bridges and parks, which cannot be broken down for individual consumption since shared use is the only possibility. Second, there are *relational values*. Love—a genuinely felt concern
for the well-being of a person to whom one is devoted, and justice—the consideration of an appropriate alignment of the rights and obligations of citizens, can exist only within interrelationships. “A human community is distinguished from a sheer aggregate,” suggests Lichtman, “by its widespread devotion to such ideals.” And third, Lichtman posits a realm of organic social values, or those which exist within the complete system of differential roles comprising a total social system. Here the negative impact of the free-enterprise system seems clear. Private property implies the absence of public control, and interpersonal competition repels social cooperation. “It is only when the economy is controlled by political decision,” Lichtman concludes, “that such alternatives as might challenge the market can be genuinely put to the community for its critical reflection” (12-13).

Given today’s flawed economic system, the time has come to end our dialogue of absurdity about how we may fine-tune the existing social arrangements. It is time to move forward with structural reforms that can draw effectively upon the economy so that the more important problems of social value and community may at last be solved.

How can our national wealth be redirected and redistributed so as to facilitate community? This is this sixth item in our list of necessary reforms, and I am particularly concerned with it because I remember so well an experience here in Fairmont a few years ago. Following the Marion County Needs Assessment in 1991, task forces were formed to address important issues such as recreation and wellness facilities, unemployment, underemployment, affordable health care, and programs for teenagers. The task forces worked effectively and developed precise, timely proposals. Comprehensive statistical evidence was presented to justify our proposals in a well-prepared, persuasive report. Yet, with a few exceptions, the recommendations of our problem-solving effort have never been implemented. They went beyond the financial capacity of a small Appalachian city and county. Meanwhile, in America’s political and financial capitals, billions of dollars were being wasted.

Money is one of humankind’s oldest inventions. Marxists, moralists and humanists have all bemoaned filthy lucre as an evil in itself, a pander between men and nations, the source of much of our alienation from others. It has been blamed for the objectification of
relationships and is said to promote deviation from the ideal human condition of reciprocity, cooperation, and community. It has been vilified as the ultimate basis for the exploitation of workers around the world. Yet I believe that the traditional attack on money misses the mark, for money is not in itself our enemy but rather our potential partner. Thus far we have not yet effectively considered the proper use and distribution of wealth in American society. While we stand aside and permit the market, or the federal government, to control the use of public funds, we inhibit the potential of those funds to help us realize community. We must implement new structures, create new institutions which will permit money to flow into and permeate the realm of social value and qualitative human activity. We must grant ourselves greater flexibility in the use of public funds, especially in providing universal employment for our citizens.

Communities are places where people choose to help each other meet their needs; places where, even though they come from diverse backgrounds and statuses, they work together for the common good. True community cannot survive in any arrangement where persons who want to participate in reciprocal need fulfillment are excluded. And so, we must draw capitalism away from antipathy to community and into partnership with it. Capitalism, the dominating force in the life of “economic man,” must be tamed, retrained, and energized so that it becomes a primary sustainer of an inclusive society, promoting the development of complete men and complete women.

In Toward Community, Richard Lichtman demonstrates how the imperative to maximize profit inhibits the full expression of our humanity. “For if money is the universal means through which everything else is measured and attained, then the largest amount of money will be seen as the necessary condition for the maximization of every other achievement and satisfaction” (9). Lichtman draws upon Aristotle’s Politics to explain how the desire to maximize profit becomes an evil. The Greek philosopher distinguished between acquisition as a moral and as an immoral act. According to Aristotle, moral acquisition requires that a real need be satisfied; and where need is real, one’s desire remains within the bounds of that necessity. Immoral acquisition serves an essentially purposeless existence rather than living well. Our society has permitted this excess of acquisition and consumption to reach historic levels. Consider
these facts. The wealthiest twenty percent of families in the United States own roughly eighty percent of the wealth; the top five percent, the “super rich,” control over half of the wealth; and the three richest families possess a combined wealth totaling $35 billion, a figure equal in value to the property of more than a million average citizens. Some sociologists argue that such concentrated ownership undermines democracy because the political system serves the interests only of the affluent. Money talks, after all. Meanwhile, the least wealthy forty percent in American society earn only 15.2 percent of the nation’s annual income. The bottom quintile among Americans actually have negative assets—debts that outweigh possessions—so that our two lowest quintiles together possess a composite wealth of zero (Macionis 163-64).

At this point it may be useful to consider some of the chief objections to proposals such as mine. My colleague Mr. Jack Pulsifer, of the History Department at Fairmont State College, has kindly suggested three:

First, what about the objection that communitarian experimentation is not new in American history, and that communitarian experiments, from Oglethorpe’s Georgia, through Robert Owen’s New Harmony, to the California Flower Children, have always failed to make deep or lasting successes? “Human nature always disappoints the utopians.” Indeed, don’t many of today’s social problems clearly result from experiments in social engineering following World War II?

Second, what about the objection that the call for community has been characteristic of ideological extremisms such as Communism and Fascism? With both these extremisms now historically discredited, should we not be highly reluctant to risk bringing them back?

Third, what about the objection that our present system, although not unflawed, still guarantees personal liberties and constitutional democracy, combining these with the high productivity of industrial capitalism to provide rising real wages, even in the face of a worldwide population explosion?

To answer the first objection, the communities I advocate are not ideal, isolated, experimental constructs like those of the historical reformers. They are actual, grass-roots communities, ranging
from small towns to urban neighborhoods. What I argue for is not theory, but the revitalization and empowerment of communities that once were flourishing and can flourish again. Second, exaggerated idealisms are indeed notoriously dangerous, but this is so whether or not they emphasize communities. The towns and neighborhoods of America are practical, commonsensical, resourceful, creative places where real problems can find real solutions—unless they continue to be deprived of the resources and power to do so. And third, I do not deny the successes of industrialization and constitutional democracy. But what we must also recognize, and work to combat, is their accumulating failures. Nancy Mayer has warned that “we Americans are still more concerned about how to make a good living than about how to live.” Our society, she continues, “is set up to maximize wealth and power rather than human fulfillment” (4). This arrangement of priorities is exactly what we can no longer afford. The sheer money-cost of poverty is, like the cost of our burgeoning prison populations, gigantic. And that says nothing of the less tangible costs in political or social instability, nor of the human costs in pain, fear, and lost hope.

Imagine an America of the future in which every local community had the power to employ all its able-bodied adult citizens in secure jobs with good wages and benefits. Some, of course, would be employed in the traditional private and public sectors, while others would work in a new, federally funded sector of employment established by a democratically elected citizens’ board. The board would be “constitutionalized” with the appropriate checks and balances, including an elected advisory group of program participants (White 132-41). The citizens’ board would be charged with, first, identifying the will of the community regarding its most important needs and problems, and then of creating programs for their resolution. The programs would incorporate highly valued, and consequently well-paid employment alternatives designed to address shared concerns. These positions would be made available to anyone previously cast into the backwash of capitalist economic activity.

Imagine the freedom of choice offered by an America determined to provide all those who want to work productively and creatively with opportunities that would reward community service by the resources needed to live purposefully and with dignity. Envision a time when this program would be directly and fully
funded by the federal government and thus empowered by the people to permit money to flow with specificity into communities stunted by the failure of the free market system to provide decent employment. Modernity’s victim, the community-by-evolutionary-process, would be replaced by a community based upon planning and commitment. Such a community would not be the product of random social forces, magical incantations, or bureaucratic legerdemain. It would be born of a consensually prepared blueprint committing real resources to workable structures. Communities do not naturally and inevitably evolve in a desirable direction. They are human institutions which must be shaped so as to embody emergent human values in solid societal forms. Given the right support, the vision becomes a reality!

Now, how might the academy contribute to this restoration? The college or university could be involved in the creation, maintenance and improvement of community-enhancing structures and reforms. Faculty and students could gain invaluable experience, expand their base of knowledge, and hone their interactive skills as they help connect citizen-employees to the community. Students majoring in Community Psychology or Human Services could participate in programs to train workers for intervention activities in the areas of substance abuse or alcoholism prevention. The Technology faculty could conduct seminars in home repair and maintenance in a situation where the elected boards were charged to provide affordable housing for the homeless or for those who previously had never imagined it possible to own their own homes. Student interns could be trained to supervise teams of community employees hired to perform home repair throughout the area. Problem-solvers with a background in Language Arts could participate in social support programs for citizens with severe reading problems and other expressive deficiencies.

These are only a few of the ways in which each local college or university could involve itself in the restoration of its immediate community. And how might the faculty at Fairmont State College contribute to such a restoration? I view my colleagues, and many of my professional friends in this region, as a potentially unlimited resource in the movement toward community—a resource as yet largely untapped. However, I also see in our ranks frustration, generated by the requirement that we conform rigidly to the expectations of credentializing bureaucracies. I see, using the terminol-
ogy of M. Scott Peck, a static pseudo-community of well educated, caring, but not yet empowered professional persons. They are capable of moving vigorously, but unfortunately they receive little or no reinforcement in their natural inclinations toward idealism. If any group is capable of overcoming obstacles to community such as rugged individualism, restraining bureaucracies, and the power agendas of those who would use others for their own selfish purposes, that group is ourselves! Someone has suggested that we invite Dr. Peck to the campus, put him behind closed doors with the faculty for a few days, and observe the community-restoration equivalent of a nuclear reaction. Imagine the possibilities!

Real communities are places where the crucial values of democracy, freedom and productive labor are operationalized to a greater degree than we have yet known in American experience. It is imperative that we create democratic institutions which foster progress in the neglected area of social values. Here, suitable employment for former “outcasts” of the community can be made available by democratic process. Other programs designed to fulfill the needs of residents unmet by the operation of the market can evolve from the flow of funds directed to this purpose by those elected. The former disenfranchised can know, perhaps for the first time in their lives, real freedom—the ability to choose gainful employment with decent wages and benefits instead of welfare dependency or “dead-end” jobs. Thus, democracy, freedom and work can be actualized, no longer just hoped for or dreamed about by those who have been excluded for so long. All these are values which can come alive in the daily life of persons who participate in the reciprocal exchanges that encompass community.

This is my vision. My challenge to you is to share in creating, once again, a personal and collective value system, and through it, the social ethic of a true community.
Works Cited


Fairmont State College Occasional Papers


No. 2. Ronald D. Pearse, “Ethical Behavior is Strategic Behavior” (1991)

No. 3. John M. Teahan, “‘One of the Nation of Many Nations’: Walt Whitman and Multiculturalism” (1992)

No. 4. Judy Prozzillo Byers, “Teaching the Art of Living: The Education Philosophy of Ruth Mary Weeks” (1993)


COLOPHON

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Drawing a high proportion of its students from within its own region, Fairmont State College welcomes the support it receives from surrounding areas. In return it participates actively in community projects, shares its programs and facilities with the public, lends its resources to promoting economic development, and serves as an information center and cultural focus.

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