

Community and Conscious Evolution | A Contemplation

by Terri O'Fallon



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For all that we engage in and envision collectives, it is a privileged muse to sink into the experience and meaning of belonging itself and into the paradoxical nature of being in groups, be they global, regional, neighborhood, or clan. The one thing every collective has in common is that it is comprised of individuals, tethered together by what often is experienced as some 'mysterious' force. Why are we here together? What is our purpose? What are our boundaries? Where do I fit within this amalgam of humans? What effect does my community have on me, and what effect do I have on my community?

Traditional Communities

As a young girl I remember my parents taking me to the Saturday Bohemian dance at Danvers Hall. My grandfather played the harmonica in the band, and doubled as one of the evening's entertaining clowns. I remember learning to dance by standing on my father's feet, and when I was exhausted I was put to sleep in one of the many tiny bedrooms that lined the walls of the dance floor. Eventually I would wake up to re-join the dance that continued through the night.

In the early morning the coal stoves in the basement were fired up and a hearty breakfast was served to the entire community who gobbled down eggs, jiternice, potato pacakes, kolache, coffee and milk before we all walked across the dusty road to our small prairie church for morning services. Completely spent from the lively evening dance and morning devotions, everyone took a drowsy drive home and dozed the rest of the day.

Our grandparents had migrated from Eastern Europe to a small Montana community. Most of the people we knew were part of this community; most of us held similar beliefs; traditions had been passed down for several generations. We were bound by the same tastes, attributes, beliefs and expectations.

I lived in this community for many years, and though all 'tradition minded' communities may not have the same beliefs or way of life, they have that lovely feel of belonging that comes from having an entity, whether tribe, family, ethnic group, and/or nation that provides one's identity, values and protection. The experiences of being in community and being an individual are nearly inseparable.

Do communities ever evolve to a new order? Like a rose bush this question is a thorny bouquet. Individuals come in and out of communities, neighborhoods, societies, and other collectives in droves and yet many communities seem to be frozen in time. Others tend to go through great positive change or to degrade into ever worsening conditions. We can engage endlessly in the common inquiries and complex conversations about communities that evolve and change as a result of economic changes, natural disasters, migration and influx of immigrants and other well-known community factors. Each community seems to have its own innate beauty.

Goal Oriented Communities

In this article, I will explore the mysterious

question of how individual consciousness and collectives co-evolve from conventional to later levels. How does this occur?

Adults have the capacity to mature through ripples of widening perspectives. The conventional community I was dedicated to in the story above was connected by tradition. Eventually, however, many adults mature to a later stage and the traditional community that held their previous attention gives way to another kind of community. In this new stage we as human creatures become interested in thinking, reasoning, analysis, prioritizing and timeliness, effectiveness and efficiency, and goal orientation.

Maturing into these new perspectives, we often find ourselves in the competitive working world. Many of our co-workers, those involved in our professional organizations and those with whom we share community, are interested in goal orientation and selecting priorities related to success and progress in their own lives. When conflicts occur, most of us want to know the root cause so that we might take some corrective action, or find some kind of resolution. Feedback is an important means to keep us on track for the achievement and management of our objectives. We look for research to back up our assertions. Most of us are quite introspective and reflective, delving into a newly discovered 'internal self' with reasoned and objective sensibilities. We work objectively with conflict through self-help programs and assertiveness training.

A typical day might be arising at five AM, meeting our workout partner at the gym for an hour, breakfast on the run as we are getting the children dressed, preparing their lunches, and carpooling to school. Then off to an 8+ hour work day of business meetings, each with a clear agenda and action items as we individually vie for a better position and salary, and feel the excitement of



1. Terri O’Fallon’s traditional community in 1950. 2. Terri’s post-conventional community today.

accomplishment with our peers. We leave just in time to pick up the kids and get them to swimming lessons and piano practice on alternative days, grabbing a ‘healthy’ prepared dinner on the way home. The evening might be spent supporting the children with their homework, and completing work left over from the day. Our spouse is attending an evening workshop on financial planning. Kids into bath and bed and finally at 12 AM we find our own mattress, hoping our spouse has made it there simultaneously. We lived a day of accomplishment and progress.

We ‘like minded’ individuals are attracted to each other because we seem to have a similar set of beliefs, and perspectives. In this case the community supports our individuality, accepting each of us as someone who can plan our own future, compete, and succeed in our life choices as a sovereign being.

Post-conventional Communities

Individual transformations persist. Those continuing to evolve may find progress, priorities, and goal orientation to be too linear; life seems more complex than their belief system accommodates. Well-documented and established objective processes may not work in every situation; circumstances seem to be context dependent, so an intense interest in situational ways-of-knowing begins to arise. Our focus wavers from goal orientation to

process and how contexts determine appropriate solutions and systems in the outer world. In the inner world we attend to multiple selves and voices and how to be in the immediate present with our internal states, emotions and embodiment. Because every situation depends on its context, a great respect for group and individual differences, cultures and relationships arises in non-linear ways. Paradoxes and projections poke their heads into our awareness (Cook-Greuter, 2002).

Communities with these sensibilities find the individual, again, co-evolving with the collective. Gatherings of all kinds, work or play, give us the opportunity to explore who we are as individuals by co-sharing our processes in the moment and learning about ourselves in relation to other’s inner processes, often in lengthy conversations. Making explicit our own way of knowing is dependent upon relating with others in a variety of contexts. Finding others who have similar ways of connecting is often critical. A deeper self begins to evolve when these multiple processes and voices in the immediate present are brought forward in mutual exchanges. Goal-oriented agendas are now in the background.

Co-existence of Levels of Community

It is interesting to note that 150 years ago the traditional community was perhaps the leading edge for common people.

Communities that were ‘like minded’ were somewhat rare, for there were fewer people who had developed to that level. When process oriented communities co-evolved, humanity had three levels of communities gracing its face: communities of ‘like tradition’ that are bound by convention; ‘like minded’ communities with goals that monitored progress toward the future; and communities within which we can explore the relativity of contexts. Our perspectives determine our individuality as we learn with and from those in the communities with which we identify.

All of these versions of communities co-exist, and people move between them based on mutual attraction. However, no particular community is required to change one’s belief structure. New members of communities are pulled into the depth of learning as exiting individuals disidentify with the old and become attracted to new acquaintances as their viewpoints widen. Side-by-side these communities of like perspectives co-exist with a multiplicity of other kinds of collectives that often draw people of many different levels of maturity into one community. Thus our world is made up of a matrix of many kinds of collectives. Most of us are exposed to people of different beliefs, each of whom is attracted to others like them, at least part of the time.

Integral Communities

When we have the capacity to distinguish between and accept these three different kinds of communities, we can step back and look at the larger pattern of the co-evolution of individuals and communities. Given this seemingly repetitive theme, we might wonder what kinds of communities are evolving right now and what kind of communities might emerge in the future.

To explore this notion we can look at the next documented level of individual maturity, those who are 'like principled' (Cook-Greuter, 2002). Here we see an extraordinary change in the way that individuals and communities co-evolve together. 'Like principled' people begin to see the benefit of a new form of goal orientation, one that is ruled by principles. Their visionary capacities see all previous perspectives and levels of community as critical to our world. Although they are interested in being with others who have similar principles, those very principles hold an inclusive view of all levels, various systems, multiple collectives and how they all interconnect and serve one another. For the first time people at this level can engage with ease in communities with mixed perspectives, for their identity is based on wholeness and integration of individual, collective, subjective and objective perspectives inclusive of the former levels.

The co-evolutionary factors of individual and community now involve a focus on personal growth through connection. We become aware of how the projections of one person onto another affect both. Others innately become mirrors of one's own self. The integration of paradox and contradiction is foremost. The co-evolution of the collective and the self has taken on a new meaning. Awareness of meaning, conflict, and projection moving through the community becomes a means to one's own individual development.

Can we imagine being in a community where integrating the contradictory nature of paradox calls us to consider that conflict may involve our own empathic connection with our preferred position and not the whole of the paradoxical continuum? Could conflict be seen as an opportunity in community engagement to apprehend one's individual and

collective wholeness, to value both ends of the paradox, and to explore mutual projections and shadows? Can we imagine being in a community where difficult relationships are a means to one's own transformation and where conflict resolution is an opportunity, in which "the Palestinian discovers her own Israeli-ness, the rich man discovers his poverty, and the woman discovers the man inside her" (Kegan, 1994)?

Can we envision identifying as an individual putting ourselves first, while concurrently being a member of the community, and putting the community first? How can we be empathically involved with our comrades and yet remain detached? Can involvement and detachment be lived simultaneously in reflective action? Can our awareness of the flowing boundaries of community be an inquiry into what 'belonging' and 'not belonging' means? How can we be with creativity when that often means the destruction of cherished traditions, structures and processes? Can we live with ease in a continual experiment where our target is incessantly moving? Might we begin to be aware of these and other paradoxes in operation as they are at play in each moment right before our eyes? Are we capable of all of this while still being critically, passionately and purposefully involved in our work in the world?

Perhaps this is the frontier of community today, a challenge indeed. And these experimental communities are already emerging in pockets here and there.

Collectives of the Future

Astonishing as it might be, there are still two more levels of human development that have been documented (Cook-Greuter, 2002) and several others that are being intuited (Wilber, 2006). These levels are inclusive of previous levels by definition. Although there are few people identified with these perspectives, we might imagine what communities co-evolving with individuals might look like in the future. We might witness opposing poles bringing each other into existence, eventually unifying them through all time and with the timeless into a very ordinary sensibility. The world of wonder can then be seen as the whole of humankind as well as in the trail of a snail and the freckles on a child's cheek; a

community of complexity evolving into simple acceptance releasing the roaring, galloping voice of the ego into a servant of humanity.

From the beginning of sentience, there has never been the appearance of a new first being without the magical appearance of a 'second' (or an entire flock of seconds) simultaneously arising (Wilber, 2006). The roots of community, it seems, have been with us from the beginning of time. In the earlier stages of sentience and collectiveness some magnetic force draws individuals who have similar perspectives together into community that protects their own ways and beliefs. Each individual gradually co-evolves through collective engagement and structural awareness and eventually expands into time, space, polarities and perspectives. Later individuals in communities continue this magnificent awareness into a profound apprehension of the sweep of time, the grandiosity of space, the unification of paradoxical polarities and the widening of perspectives; for they now experience all beings connected to this planet as part of their personal community and they can see how impossible individual evolution is without the company of others. And the muse continues as we curious humans continue to co-evolve with the community of sentience. Perhaps one day we will come to experience ourselves as a parent of humankind, raising consciousness like we now think of raising children. In the sweep of time and space perhaps we will each learn to live our individual lives as a homeopathic drop in the pool of humanity offering to one another multiple intersecting healing waves. Will we as evolving individuals, ever-indebted to the humanly throng, continue to co-evolve our most sacred individual selves in sanctified communion with others?

*As I gaze into collective Eyes
I find the Sacred
And Myself*

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