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Finding Community at Home

Katherine M. Greenleaf

The Margaret Chase Smith Essay

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by Katherine M. Greenleaf

In 1999 I put a stake in the ground—literally. It started when I decided to stop being "from" Maine and decided to be "in" Maine. My address did not change, but my focus did. I decided to live my life in a community of interest and place.

In the last five years my life has been "virtualized." I "instant chat" on my computer with a friend in New Zealand, send my daughter in college her grandmother's recipe for brownie pudding through e-mail, and work on a daily basis with people thousands of miles away. My work is increasingly global. My jar of loose change has francs, lire, and punts. The company I work for is more dependent on global commodity pricing than the Dow Jones. Frequently I know more about what is going on nationally than I do about what is happening down the street.

As my life has become increasingly cyber-based, distance-irrelevant, time-zone insensitive, and globally immersed, I find a strong need to root in a place. This rooting is not to deny or isolate me from the world, but to create a center of gravity that gives me the ballast to withstand the speed and scope of the ever-expanding world around me.

I am not alone in seeking this balance. In John Nesbitt's book *Megatrends*, he describes a phenomenon he calls "High Tech-High Touch." As a society becomes more technologically adept, there is an equal interest in areas that emphasize seemingly opposite, more human attribut-

es. For example, with neo-natal intensive care units in hospitals also come birthing rooms that replicate the atmosphere of a home birth. It is a type of natural-social physics that, for every action, there is an equal and opposing reaction. The more we live in an intangible cyberspace connected only by our words and common interests, the more we need physical tangible connection to the places and people where we live.

For the majority of human history geography was destiny. The concept of community assumed a common place. But in the last century a dramatic increase in mobility coupled with specialization born of complexity has led to communities based on common interests not locale. The word community is now typically defined in one of two ways: 1) a social group whose members reside in a specific locality and share a common government, or 2) a social group sharing a common interest that in some respect is distinct from larger society. The former is a community of place, the latter a community of interest. The Internet has created yet another variant of community called virtual communities—communities of interest unconstrained by place, distance and time.

These various types of communities can be seen as mutually exclusive, each demanding time and energy from lives already too harried and fragmented by competing pressures. But consider the power and sustenance that is available

when we can participate in something that truly interests us in the place we live. From a personal perspective, the last time I experienced a real community of common interest and common place was in college, and what a rich experience it was. I was planted in a human green house rich with sustained contact, shared environment, diverse opinions and the ease that convenience and accessibility affords. I did not have to plan, schedule or travel to fully participate in this community— it was simply there.

As I grew older, my workplace became a source of community. But I began to see that deriving a sense of community from the workplace carries the risk of confusing the realities of an economic organization with the fabric of a social community. People are not downsized from their community.

Similarly, my children created a strong sense of community centered on the school. But when my kids left for college, the ties to the school loosened. People do not graduate from their community.

Most of my experience with community was focused primarily on interest with place a secondary consideration. I decided to reverse that order and put more emphasis on place. Where to start? One step at a time, I decided to take daily walks in my neighborhood.

Walking is enjoyable, but walking with good company is a delight. I became intrigued with finding other people who lived within a short distance of my house that I might enjoy knowing. I approached several people of varying degrees of familiarity and we started to take walks. As we walked we discovered the common denominators in our lives that develop from sharing a common place. We discussed everything from the weather to acquaintances to the quality of essential services which created a common backdrop to our individual lives.

Secure in what we shared, we began to explore how we differ. We told our stories, in brief sketches initially, but gradually in more detail. Over time the experiences which give context to our values, our choices and our beliefs emerged. We exchanged views on political candidates, civic issues, and schools. These walks have lead to sharing information and resources in a wide variety of subjects ranging from job opportunities and information on international travel, to professional referrals and recipes for local delicacies. Short walks have turned into long walks.

My experience has convinced me of the richness of communities of interest and place, and fueled a determination to support the development of such communities for others and myself. In the past I viewed a strong sense of community and place as secure but potentially provincial and isolated from national and global events. Now I see such community as an essential portal into meaningful engagement with the vast, high-speed complex world of the twenty-first century.

How can we support the development of communities of interest and place? By placing greater effort on designing processes and forums that build connection and familiarity with one another before taking up the contentious issues that divide us. The following are suggestions:

- Focus more on the people of our community and less on budgets.

  Create more general interest gatherings where the talents and abilities of the people in the community are the starting point rather than a specific agenda item. Gather and inventory our "intellectual capital" with the same fervor with which we collect and spend taxes.

- Ensure availability of convenient public places where people can meet on a frequent basis.

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As our homes have become more fragmented with smaller family units, large gatherings in common space are becoming rare. Common, accessible public space is a prerequisite to building contact between people in a community. Neutral public places where people need not be invited are an important factor in creating an inclusive community.

• Focus more on concrete actionable opportunities that build community and less on abstract issues.

A sense of place requires we be in touch with our senses—what we see, hear, feel, smell and taste. Public policy discussions frequently become abstract and lack the vitality that a tangible community opportunity can rally. Furthermore, such discussions are frequently focused on problems and not on opportunities. The momentum and confidence generated by small tangible accomplishments equips a group with the confidence and momentum to take on more difficult challenges.

• Use our common experiences to build a base and vocabulary to explore our differences.

The fact that we all live through an early blizzard in December does not mean we experience it in the same way. The elderly person living alone experiences the blizzard differently than the young ski enthusiast. When there are major natural events in a community, we should find ways to talk about them and to share our stories.

• Learn and use new technologies in adult learning and group process to build community interaction versus sticking with traditional rules that seek to control it.

Many public forums use outmoded agendas, rules and processes designed to control discussion and maintain order rather than foster dialogue and generate interest. Rather than bringing people together in a way that builds interest and enthusiasm, the process used in a meeting unintentionally kills it. Just as the Internet is a new tool that has democratized the availability of information, new human technologies in group process are very effective at harnessing and channeling the activities of democratic community groups.

I had seen the bumper sticker "Think Globally Act Locally," but I found myself caught up in acting globally and was unable to connect locally. My search for community grew in part from my fear of becoming a person without place, swept up in a "technological diaspora." To my surprise, I have found that the forces which have led me to connect to a much larger world have also led me to connect to my community—a place I call home. ❧

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Katherine Maxim Greenleaf is senior vice president of Client Operations at Wright Express in South Portland Maine. Katherine is also a director of People's Heritage Holding Company, Martinspoint Healthcare, and the Gulf of Maine Aquarium. She holds an undergraduate degree from Connecticut College, law degree from Boston University Law School and diploma in Advanced Studies in Systems and Organizational Change from the Gestalt Institute in Cleveland. She and her family live in Yarmouth, Maine.