The Different Drum

COMMUNITY MAKING AND PEACE

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY TOWARD SELF-ACCEPTANCE, TRUE BELONGING, AND NEW HOPE FOR THE WORLD

"Toughminded and courageous...profoundly important."
—San Francisco Chronicle

M. Scott Peck, M.D.

Author of the classic best-seller THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

CHAPTER V

Stages of Community-Making

Communities, like individuals, are unique. Still we all share the human condition. So it is that groups assembled deliberately to form themselves into community routinely go through certain stages in the process. These stages, in order, are:

Pseudocommunity
Chaos
Emptiness
Community

Not every group that becomes a community follows this paradigm exactly. Communities that temporarily form in response to crisis, for instance, may skip over one or more stages for the time being. I do not insist that community development occur by formula. But in the process of community-making by design, this is the natural, usual order of things.*

PSEUDOCOMMUNITY

The first response of a group in seeking to form a community is most often to try to fake it. The members attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement. This attempt—this pre-

* Others who have worked extensively with groups that have become communities have discerned that there are stages of the developmental process. Among group leaders there is even a mnemonic about such stages: "Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing." But this simple formula, while not useless, is at best incomplete.

tense of community—is what I term "pseudocommunity." It never works.

I was quite nonplussed when I first encountered pseudocommunity—particularly since it was created by experts. It occurred during a workshop in Greenwich Village, in lower Manhattan, whose members, to a person, were highly sophisticated, achievement-oriented New Yorkers. Many had undergone extensive psychoanalysis, and they were all accustomed to being "unspontaneously vulnerable." Within minutes they were sharing deep, intimate details of their lives. And during the very first break they were already hugging. Poof—instant community!

But something was missing. At first I was delighted, and I thought, Boy, this is a piece of cake. I don't have to worry about a thing. But by the middle of the day I began to grow uneasy, and it was impossible to put my finger on the problem. I didn't have the wonderful, joyful, excited feeling I had always had in community. I was, in fact, slightly bored. Yet to all intents and purposes the group seemed to be behaving just like a real community. I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know whether I ought to do anything. So I let it slide for the rest of the day.

I did not sleep well that night. Near dawn, still having no idea whether it was the right thing to do, I decided I owed it to the group to disclose my sense of unease. When we assembled the second morning I began by saying, "You're an unusually sophisticated group of people. I think that's why we seemed to become a community so quickly and easily yesterday morning. But perhaps it was too quick and too easy. I have a strange feeling that something's missing, that we're really not a community yet. Let's have a period of silence now and see how we will respond to it."

Respond the group did! Within five minutes of the end of the silence these seemingly mellow, affectionate people were almost at one another's throats. Dozens of interpersonal resentments from the previous day surfaced practically simultaneously. Fast and furiously the members began clobbering each other with their different ideologies and theologies. It was glorious chaos! And finally we were able to begin the work of building real community, which, by the end of the workshop we succeeded in doing. But until that point of chaos the group, with all its sophistication, had succeeded only in delaying the process for a whole day.

There are two morals to this story. One is: Beware of instant community. Community-making requires time as well as effort and sacrifice. It cannot be cheaply bought. The other moral is that it is at least as easy to build community among unsophisticated people as among the sophisticated. I have never seen the community-making process work more rapidly and effectively, for instance, than among a group of civic leaders of a small Midwestern city who had almost no psychological training. The sophisticated, on the other hand, may be more adept at faking.

In pseudocommunity a group attempts to purchase community cheaply by pretense. It is not an evil, conscious pretense of deliberate black lies. Rather, it is an unconscious, gentle process whereby people who want to be loving attempt to be so by telling little white lies, by withholding some of the truth about themselves and their feelings in order to avoid conflict. But it is still a pretense. It is an inviting but illegitimate shortcut to nowhere

The essential dynamic of pseudocommunity is conflict-avoidance. The absence of conflict in a group is not by itself diagnostic. Genuine communities may experience lovely and sometimes lengthy periods free from conflict. But that is because they have learned how to deal with conflict rather than avoid it. Pseudocommunity is conflict-avoiding; true community is conflict-resolving.

What is diagnostic of pseudocommunity is the minimization, the lack of acknowledgment, or the ignoring of individual differences. Nice people are so accustomed to being well mannered that they are able to deploy their good manners without even thinking about what they are doing. In pseudocommunity it is as if every individual member is operating according to the

same book of etiquette. The rules of this book are: Don't do or say anything that might offend someone else; if someone does or says something that offends, annoys, or irritates you, act as if nothing has happened and pretend you are not bothered in the least; and if some form of disagreement should show signs of appearing, change the subject as quickly and smoothly as possible—rules that any good hostess knows. It is easy to see how these rules make for a smoothly functioning group. But they also crush individuality, intimacy, and honesty, and the longer it lasts the duller it gets.

The basic pretense of pseudocommunity is the denial of individual differences. The members pretend—act as if—they all have the same belief in Jesus Christ, the same understanding of the Russians, even the same life history. One of the characteristics of pseudocommunity is that people tend to speak in generalities. "Divorce is a miserable experience," they will say. Or "One has to trust one's instincts." Or "We need to accept that our parents did the best they could." Or "Once you've found God, then you don't need to be afraid anymore." Or "Jesus has saved us from our sins."

Another characteristic of pseudocommunity is that the members will let one another get away with such blanket statements. Individuals will think to themselves, I found God twenty years ago and I'm still scared, but why let the group know that? To avoid the risk of conflict they keep their feelings to themselves and even nod in agreement, as if a speaker has uttered some universal truth. Indeed, the pressure to skirt any kind of disagreement may be so great that even the very experienced communicators in the group—who know perfectly well that speaking in generalities is destructive to genuine communication—may be inhibited from challenging what they know is wrong. The effect of this inhibition is such that the proverbial observer from Mars would conclude from pseudocommunity that while human beings look very different on the outside, they are all the same on the inside. The observer might also conclude that human beings are boring.

In my experience most groups that refer to themselves as "communities" are, in fact, pseudocommunities. Think about whether the expression of individual differences is encouraged or discouraged, for instance, in the average church congregation. Is the kind of conformism I have described in the first stage of community-making the norm or the exception in our society? Could there be many people who do not even know that there is anything beyond pseudocommunity?

Since that workshop in Greenwich Village I've found it not only easy to recognize pseudocommunity but also to nip it in the bud. Often all that is required is to challenge the platitudes or generalizations. When Mary says, "Divorce is a terrible thing," I am likely to comment: "Mary, you're making a generalization. I hope you don't mind my using you as an example for the group, but one of the things people need to learn to communicate well is how to speak personally—how to use 'I' and 'my' statements. I wonder if you couldn't rephrase your statement to 'My divorce was a terrible thing for me.' "

"All right," Mary agrees. "My divorce was a terrible thing for me."

"I'm glad you put it that way, Mary," Theresa is likely to say, "because my divorce was the best thing that ever happened to me in the last twenty years."

Once individual differences are not only allowed but encouraged to surface in some such way, the group almost immediately moves to the second stage of community development: chaos.

CHAOS

The chaos always centers around well-intentioned but misguided attempts to heal and convert. Let me cite a prototypical example. After a period of uneasy silence a member will say, "Well, the reason I came to this workshop is that I have such-and-such a problem, and I thought I might find a solution to it here."

"I had that problem once," a second member will respond. "I did such-and-such, and it took care of the difficulty."

"Well, I tried that," the first member answers, "but it didn't solve anything."

"When I acknowledged Jesus to be my Lord and Savior," a third member announces, "it took care of that problem and every other problem I had."

"I'm sorry," says the first member, "but that Jesus Lord-and-Savior stuff just doesn't grab me. It's not where I'm at."

"No," says a fourth member. "As a matter of fact, it makes me want to puke."

"But it's *true*," proclaims a fifth member.

And so they're off.

By and large, people resist change. So the healers and converters try harder to heal or convert, until finally their victims get their backs up and start trying to heal the healers and convert the converters. It is indeed chaos.

Chaos is not just a state, it is an essential part of the process of community development. Consequently, unlike pseudocommunity, it does not simply go away as soon as the group becomes aware of it. After a period of chaos, when I remark, "We don't seem to be doing very well at community, do we?" someone will reply, "No, and it's because of this."

"No, it's because of that," someone else will say. And so they're off again.

In the stage of chaos individual differences are, unlike those in pseudocommunity, right out in the open. Only now, instead of trying to hide or ignore them, the group is attempting to obliterate them. Underlying the attempts to heal and convert is not so much the motive of love as the motive to make everyone *normal*—and the motive to win, as the members fight over whose norm might prevail.

The desire to convert, however, does not necessarily center around issues of theology. The stage of chaos in the group of civic leaders I previously mentioned revolved around the different plans of the members to benefit their city. One felt her plan to house the homeless was the way. Another saw the labor-management relations board as the most critical focus. Another believed the program to curb child abuse was more essential. So these well-motivated men and women clobbered each other over the head with their own pet projects; each wanted his or her particular project to win or prevail, and each attempted to convert the others to his or her way.

The stage of chaos is a time of fighting and struggle. But that is not its essence. Frequently, fully developed communities will be required to fight and struggle. Only they have learned to do so effectively. The struggle during chaos is chaotic. It is not merely noisy, it is uncreative, unconstructive. The disagreement that arises from time to time in a genuine community is loving and respectful and usually remarkably quiet—even peaceful—as the members work hard to listen to each other. Still, upon occasion in a fully mature community the discussion might become heated. Yet even then it is vivacious, and one has a feeling of excitement over the consensus that will be hammered out. Not so in chaos. If anything, chaos, like pseudocommunity, is boring, as the members continually swat at each other to little or no effect. It has no grace or rhythm. Indeed, the predominant feeling an observer is likely to have in response to a group in the chaotic stage of development is despair. The struggle is going nowhere, accomplishing nothing. It is no fun.

Since chaos is unpleasant, it is common for the members of a group in this stage to attack not only each other but also their leader. "We wouldn't be squabbling like this if we had effective leadership," they will say. "We deserve more direction than you've been giving us, Scotty." In some sense they are quite correct; their chaos is a natural response to a relative lack of direction. The chaos could easily be circumvented by an authoritarian leader—a dictator—who assigned them specific tasks and goals. The only problem is that a group led by a dictator is not, and never can be, a community. Community and totalitarianism are incompatible.

In response to this perceived vacuum of leadership during the chaotic stage of community development, it is common for one or more members of the group to attempt to replace the designated leader. He or she (usually it is a he) will say, "Look, this is getting us nowhere. Why don't we go around the circle counterclockwise and each person say something about himself or herself?" Or "Why don't we break into small groups of six or eight, and then we can get somewhere?" Or "Why don't we form a subcommittee to develop a definition of community? Then we will know where we're going."

The problem of the emergence of such "secondary leaders" is not their emergence but their proposed solutions. What they are proposing, one way or another, is virtually always an "escape into organization." It is true that organizing is a solution to chaos. Indeed, that is the primary reason for organization: to minimize chaos. The trouble is, however, that organization and community are also incompatible. Committees and chairpeople do not a community make. I am not implying that it is impossible for a business, church, or some other organization to have a degree of community within itself. I am not an anarchist. But an organization is able to nurture a measure of community within itself only to the extent that it is willing to risk or tolerate a certain lack of structure. As long as the goal is community-building, organization as an attempted solution to chaos is an unworkable solution.

The duration of the chaotic stage of community development varies, depending on the nature of the leader and the nature of the group. Some groups will leave it behind almost as soon as I point the way out. Even though chaos is unpleasant, other groups will resist its proper resolution for a number of painful hours. Back in the sensitivity-group days there were a number of groups that languished in unproductive chaos for their entire existence.

The proper resolution of chaos is not easy. Because it is both unproductive and unpleasant, it may seem that the group has *degenerated* from pseudocommunity into chaos. But chaos is not necessarily the worst place for a group to be. Several years ago I had the opportunity to consult briefly with a large church that was in chaos. A few years before, the congregation had chosen a dynamic new minister to lead it. His style of leadership turned out to be even more assertive than they had bargained for. By the time I visited, over a third of the congregation had been deeply alienated by this style, but the majority was delighted with it. The disagreement was quite vocal, and the membership was in real pain over the schism. Yet in their outspokenness, their open suffering, and their commitment to hang in there as they struggled with each other I sensed a great deal of vitality. I was hardly able to suggest any immediate solution. But I was at least able to offer some consolation by telling them that I sensed more vitality in their congregation than most church bodies. "Your chaos," I explained to them, "is preferable to pseudocommunity. You are not a healthy community, but you are able to confront the issues openly. Fighting is far better than pretending you are not divided. It's painful, but it's a beginning. You are aware that you need to move beyond your warring factions, and that's infinitely more hopeful than if you felt you didn't need to move at all."

EMPTINESS

"There are only two ways out of chaos," I will explain to a group after it has spent a sufficient period of time squabbling and getting nowhere. "One is into organization—but organization is never community. The only other way is into and through emptiness."

More often than not the group will simply ignore me and go on squabbling. Then after another while I will say, "I suggested to you that the only way from chaos to community is into and through emptiness. But apparently you were not terribly interested in my suggestion." More squabbling, but finally a member will ask with a note of annoyance, "Well, what is this emptiness stuff anyway?"

It is no accident that groups are not generally eager to pick up on my suggestion of emptiness. The fact that "emptiness"

is a mystical sort of word and concept is not the deterrent. People are smart, and often in the dimmer recesses of their consciousness they know more than they want to know. As soon as I mention "emptiness," they have a presentiment of what is to come. And they are in no hurry to accept it.

Emptiness is the hard part. It is also the most crucial stage of community development. It is the bridge between chaos and community.

When the members of a group finally ask me to explain what I mean by emptiness, I tell them simply that they need to empty themselves of barriers to communication. And I am able to use their behavior during chaos to point out to them specific things—feelings, assumptions, ideas, and motives—that have so filled their minds as to make them impervious as billiard balls. The process of emptying themselves of these barriers is the key to the transition from "rugged" to "soft" individualism. The most common (and interrelated) barriers to communication that people need to empty themselves of before they can enter genuine community are:

Expectations and Preconceptions. Community-building is an adventure, a going into the unknown. People are routinely terrified of the emptiness of the unknown. Consequently they fill their minds with generally false expectations of what the experience will be like. In fact, we humans seldom go into any situation without preconceptions. We then try to make the experience conform to our expectations. Occasionally this is useful behavior, but usually (and always in regard to community-building) it is destructive. Until such time as we can empty ourselves of expectations and stop trying to fit others and our relationships with them into a preconceived mold we cannot really listen, hear, or experience. "Life is what happens when you've planned something else," someone once wisely put it. But despite this wisdom, we still do not go easily into new situations with an open (and empty) mind.

Prejudices. Prejudice, which is probably more often unconscious than conscious, comes in two forms. One is the judgments we make about people without any experience of them whatsoever, as when you or I might say to ourselves on meeting a stranger, "He's effeminate. I bet he's a real creep." Or "My God, she looks like she's ninety—probably senile." Even more common are the judgments we make about people on the basis of very brief, limited experience. Not a workshop goes by when I don't quickly conclude that some member is a real "nerd," only to discover later that that person has enormous gifts. One reason to distrust instant community is that community-building requires time—the time to have sufficient experience to become conscious of our prejudices and then to empty ourselves of them.

Ideology, Theology, and Solutions. Obviously we cannot move very far toward community with our fellow human beings when we are thinking and feeling, *She clearly has no appreciation of Christian doctrine; she has a long way to go before she will be saved like me.* Or else, *Well, it's clear he's a Republican businessman hawk. I hope there'll be someone here worth relating to.* It is not only such ideological and theological rigidities that we need to discard, it is any idea that assumes the status of "the one and only right way." So it was that the group of Midwestern civic leaders I mentioned had to empty themselves of their pet plans, which each thought was *the* solution for their city.

In speaking of this emptying process, however, I do not mean to imply we should utterly forsake our sometimes hard-won sentiments and understandings. A community-building workshop in Virginia several years ago offered an example of the distinction between emptying and obliteration. The group was the most dedicated band of converters I have ever encountered. Everyone wanted to talk about God; everyone had a different idea of God; and everyone was certain she or he knew exactly who God was. It didn't take us long to get into chaos of magnificent proportions. But thirty-six hours later, after the group had made its miraculous transition from chaos

to community, I told them, "It's fascinating. Today you are still talking just as much about God as you were yesterday. In that respect you haven't changed. What has happened, however, is the way in which you talk. Yesterday each of you was talking as if you had God in your back pocket. Today you are all talking about God with humility and a sense of humor."

The Need to Heal, Convert, Fix, or Solve. During the stage of chaos, when the members of a group attempt to heal or convert each other, they believe they are being loving. And they are truly surprised by the chaos that results. After all, isn't it the loving thing to do to relieve your neighbor of her suffering or help him to see the light? Actually, however, almost all these attempts to convert and heal are not only naïve and ineffective but quite self-centered and self-serving. It hurts me when my friend is in pain. If I can do something to get rid of this pain I will feel better. My most basic motive when I strive to heal is to feel good myself. But there are several problems here. One is that my cure is usually not my friend's. Indeed, offering someone my cure usually only makes that person feel worse. So it was that all the advice that Job's friends gave him in his time of affliction served only to make him more miserable. The fact of the matter is that often the most loving thing we can do when a friend is in pain is to *share* that pain—to be there even when we have nothing to offer except our presence and even when being there is painful to ourselves.

The same is true with the attempt to convert. If your theology or ideology is different from mine, it calls mine into question. It is uncomfortable for me to be uncertain of my own understanding in such basic matters. On the other hand, if I could convert you to my way of thinking, it would not only relieve my discomfort, it would be further proof of the rectitude of my beliefs and cast me in the role of savior to boot. How much easier and nicer that would be than extending myself to understand you as you are.

As they enter the stage of emptiness the members of a group come to realize—sometimes suddenly, sometimes gradually—

that their desire to heal, convert, or otherwise "solve" their interpersonal differences is a self-centered desire for comfort through the obliteration of these differences. And then it begins to dawn on them that there may be an opposite way: the appreciation and celebration of interpersonal differences. No group ever got the message more quickly than those unsophisticated Midwestern civic leaders. Because we had little time to work together, I was blunt with them. "I told you at the beginning," I reminded them, "that our purpose in being together is to form ourselves into a community, and not to solve the problems of your city. Yet here you are in short order not talking about yourselves but about your proposed solutions. They all sound to me like very fine ideas, but the fact is that you are clobbering each other over the head with them. Now, if you want, you can keep on doing that for the next twenty-four hours, but I honestly don't think it's going to get you or the city any further than when you walked in here this morning. And it certainly isn't going to get you to community. If you want to get to community, on the other hand, you're going to have to empty yourselves of your fine proposals and your need to see them triumph. And maybe, just maybe, if you become a true community, you will be able to work together in such a way that it will help your city. I don't know. But let's take an extra-long break—forty minutes—and let's see if during that time each of you can possibly empty yourself of your solutions sufficiently for us at least to get to know each other as different human beings."

We became a community within the hour.

The Need to Control. This barrier to community is my own prime bugaboo. As the designated leader of a workshop I am supposed to see to it that the group does not get out of control—that it comes to no harm. Furthermore, even though I have told the group that each member is no more and no less responsible than any other member for the success of the group, I don't really feel that way in my heart. If the workshop fails, I feel, I'm the one who is going to look bad. Consequently

I am constantly tempted to *do* things—manipulations or maneuvers—that will ensure the desired outcome. But the desired outcome—community—cannot be achieved by an authoritarian leader who calls the shots. It must be a creation of the group as a whole. Paradoxically, then, to be an effective leader I must spend most of the time sitting back, *doing nothing*, waiting, letting it happen. As a basically overcontrolling person I don't do that very easily.

The need for control—to ensure the desired outcome—is at least partially rooted in the fear of failure. For me to empty myself of my overcontrolling tendencies I must continually empty myself of this fear. I must be willing to fail. Indeed, a significant number of workshops have succeeded in becoming communities only after I have said to myself, "Well, it looks as if this one is going to fail, and I'm helpless to do anything about it." I am not sure such timing is accidental.

The learning that occurs in community-building is frequently extended to day-to-day living. My experience in emptying myself of my need to control has begun to improve some of my everyday relationships, including my relationship to life itself. Others have joined me, through community, in learning an increased capacity for surrender and how to appreciate the truth that often "Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived."

I have hardly exhausted the list of things that individuals may need to give up in order to form themselves into a community. I routinely ask the members of a group to reflect in silence, during a break period or overnight, on what they as individuals most need to empty themselves of in their own unique lives. When they return, their reports are as varied as the topography of our globe: "I need to give up my need for my parents' approval," "my need to be liked," "my resentment of my son," "my preoccupation with money," "my anger at God," "my dislike of homosexuals," "my concern about neatness," and so on, and so on. Such giving up is a sacrificial process. Consequently the stage of emptiness in community development is a time of sacrifice. And sacrifice hurts. "Do I have to give up everything?" a group member once wailed during this stage.

"No," I replied, "just everything that stands in your way."

Such sacrifice hurts because it is a kind of death, the kind of death that is necessary for rebirth. But even when we realize this intellectually, such dying is still a fearsome adventure into the unknown. And many group members during the stage of emptiness often seem almost paralyzed between fear and hope, because they will incorrectly think and feel about emptiness not in terms of rebirth but in terms of "nothingness" or annihilation.

The terror that may be involved was never more dramatically illustrated than in Martin's "rebirth." Martin was a slightly hard and depressed-appearing sixty-year-old man whose "workaholism" had made him extremely successful, even famous. During the stage of emptiness in a workshop he and his wife attended, and when the group was still attempting to deal with emptiness on the level of an intellectual concept, Martin suddenly began to tremble and shake. For a brief moment I thought he might be having a seizure. But then, almost as if he were in a trance, he began to moan, "I'm scared. I don't know what's happening to me. All this talk about emptiness. I don't know what it means. I feel I'm going to die. I'm terrified."

Several of us gathered around Martin, holding him for comfort, still uncertain whether he was in a physical or emotional crisis.

"It feels like dying," Martin continued to moan. "Emptiness. I don't know what emptiness is. All my life I've done things. You mean I don't have to do anything? I'm scared."

Martin's wife took his hand. "No, you don't have to do anything, Martin," she said.

"But I've always done things," Martin continued. "I don't know what it's like not to do anything. Emptiness. Is that what emptiness is? Giving up doing things? Could I really not do anything?"

"It's all right to do nothing, Martin," his wife responded.

Martin stopped shaking. We held him for about five minutes. Then he let us know that his fear of emptiness, his terror of dying, had subsided. And within an hour his face began to radiate a soft serenity. He knew that he had been broken and had survived. He also knew that through his brokenness he had somehow helped the whole group toward community.

Because the stage of emptiness can be so painful, there are two questions I am routinely asked with agony. One is, "Isn't there any way into community except through emptiness?" My answer is "No." The other question is, "Isn't there any way into community except through the sharing of brokenness?" Again my answer is "No."

As a group moves into emptiness, a few of its members begin to share their own brokenness—their defeats, failures, doubts, fears, inadequacies, and sins. They begin to stop acting as if they "had it all together" as they reflect on those things they need to empty themselves of. But the other members generally do not listen to them very attentively. Either they revert to attempts to heal or convert the broken members or else they ignore them by quickly changing the topic. Consequently those who have made themselves vulnerable tend to retreat quickly into their shells. It is not easy to confess your weakness when others are apt to try immediately to change you or else behave as if you haven't said anything worth listening to.

Sometimes the group by itself will soon come to recognize that it is blocking expressions of pain and suffering—that in order to truly listen they have to *truly* empty themselves, even of their distaste for "bad news." If they don't, it becomes necessary for me to point out to its members that they are discouraging the sharing of brokenness. Some groups will then immediately correct their callousness. But other groups toward the end of the stage of emptiness will wage their final last-ditch struggle against community. Typically, there will be a spokesman who will say, "Look, I have my own burdens at home. There's no need to pay good money and spend a whole weekend just to take on more burdens. I'm all for this community business, but I don't see why we have to focus so much on negative things all the time. Why can't we talk about the good things, the things we have in common, our successes instead of our failures? I'd like this to be a joyful experience. What's the point of community if it can't be joyful?"

Basically this final resistance is an attempt to flee back into pseudocommunity. But here the issue at stake is no longer over whether individual differences will be denied. The group has moved too far for that. Instead the struggle is over wholeness. It is over whether the group will choose to embrace not only the light of life but also life's darkness. True community *is* joyful, but it is also realistic. Sorrow and joy must be seen in their proper proportions.

I have spoken of the stage of emptiness largely as if it were something that occurs solely within the minds and souls of the individuals who compose a group. But community is always something more than the sum total of the individuals present. Pseudocommunity, chaos, and emptiness are not so much individual stages as group stages. The transformation of a group from a collection of individuals into genuine community requires little deaths in many of those individuals. But it is also a process of group death, group dying. During the stage of emptiness my own gut feeling is often not so much the pain of watching individuals here and there undergoing little deaths and rebirths as it is the pain of witnessing a group in its death throes. The whole group seems to writhe and moan in its travail. Individuals will sometimes speak for the group. "It's like we're dying. The group is in agony. Can't you help us? I didn't know we'd have to die to become a community."

Just as the physical death of some individuals is rapid and gentle while for others agonizing and protracted, so it is for the emotional surrender of groups. Whether sudden or gradual, however, all the groups in my experience have eventually succeeded in completing, accomplishing, this death. They have all made it through emptiness, through the time of sacrifice, into community. This is an extraordinary testament to the human spirit. What it means is that given the right circumstances and knowledge of the rules, on a certain but very real level we human beings are able to die for each other.

COMMUNITY

When its death has been completed, open and empty, the group enters community. In this final stage a soft quietness descends. It is a kind of peace. The room is bathed in peace. Then, quietly, a member begins to talk about herself. She is being very vulnerable. She is speaking of the deepest part of herself. The group hangs on each word. No one realized she was capable of such eloquence.

When she is finished there is a hush. It goes on a long time. But it does not seem long. There is no uneasiness in this silence. Slowly, out of the silence, another member begins to talk. He too is speaking very deeply, very personally, about himself. He is not trying to heal or convert the first person. He's not even trying to respond to her. It's not she but he who is the subject. Yet the other members of the group do not sense he has ignored her. What they feel is that it is as if he is laying himself down next to her on an altar.

The silence returns.

A third member speaks. Perhaps it will be to respond to the previous speaker, but there will be in this response no attempt to heal or convert. It may be a joke, but it will not be at anyone's expense. It may be a short poem that is almost magically appropriate. It could be anything soft and gentle, but again it will be a gift.

Then the next member speaks. And as it goes on, there will be a great deal of sadness and grief expressed; but there will also be much laughter and joy. There will be tears in abundance. Sometimes they will be tears of sadness, sometimes of joy. Sometimes, simultaneously, they will be tears of both. And then something almost more singular happens. An extraordinary amount of healing and converting begins to occur—now that no one is trying to convert or heal. And community has been born.

What happens next? The group has become a community. Where does it go from here? What, then, is its task?

There is no one answer to those questions. For the groups that have assembled specifically for a short-term experience of community, its primary task may be no more than simply to enjoy that experience—and benefit from the healing that accompanies it. It will have the additional task, however, of ending itself. Somehow there must be closure. Women and men who have come to care for each other deeply need time to say goodbyes. The pains of returning to an everyday world without community need expression. It is important for short-term communities to give themselves the time for ending. This is often done best when the community is able to develop for itself a joyous sort of funeral, with some kind of liturgy or ritual for conclusion.

If the group has assembled with the ultimate goal of solving a problem—planning a campaign, healing a division within a congregation, engineering a merger, for example—then it should get on with that task. But only after it has had the time to enjoy the experience of community for itself sufficiently to cement the experience. Such groups should always bear in mind the rule: "Community-building first, problem-solving second."

Or the task of the community may be the difficult one of deciding whether it will or will not maintain itself. This decision usually should not be made quickly. In the joy of the moment members may make commitments that they shortly discover they are unable to fulfill. The consequences of long-term commitment are major and should not be taken lightly.

If a community—or part of it—does decide to maintain itself, it will have many new tasks. Community maintenance requires that multiple major decisions be made or remade over extensive periods of time. The community will frequently fall back into chaos or even pseudocommunity in the process. Over and again it will need to do the agonizing work of

reemptying itself. Many groups fail here. Many convents and monasteries, for instance, while referring to themselves as "communities," long ago allowed themselves to become rigid authoritarian organizations. As such they may continue to fill useful roles in society, but they do so without joy and fail to be a "safe place" for their membership. They have forgotten that maintaining themselves as a true community should take priority over all the other tasks of their community.

Because I have spoken so glowingly of its virtues, it worries me that some might conclude that life in community is easier or more comfortable than ordinary existence. It is not. But it is certainly more *lively*, more intense. The agony is actually greater, but so is the joy. The experience of joy in community, however, is hardly automatic. During times of struggle the majority of the members of a true community will not experience joy. Instead, the prevailing mood may be one of anxiety, frustration, or fatigue. Even when the dominant mood is one of joy, a few members, because of individual worries or conflicts, may still be unable to feel a part of the community spirit. Yet the most common emotional response to the spirit of community is the feeling of joy.

It is like falling in love. When they enter community, people in a very real sense do fall in love with one another en masse. They not only feel like touching and hugging each other, they feel like hugging everyone all at once. During the highest moments the energy level is supernatural. It is ecstatic. Lily provided one community myth during a workshop in a Knoxville hotel when she pointed to an electrical outlet in the center of the floor and commented: "It's as if we're connected to the entire electrical energy output of the TVA."

Great power, however, can sometimes hold potential danger. The danger of the power of true community is never the creation of mob psychology but of group sexuality. It is only natural when a group of people fall in love with one another that enormous sexual energy should be released. Usually this is not harmful, but it is wise for communities to be aware of their great potential sexuality in order that it does not get out of hand. It may need to be suppressed. It should not, however, be repressed. And it is wise to remember that the experience of the other forms of love, "phila" and "agape" (brother or sister love, and divine love) can be even deeper and more rewarding than simple erotic or romantic bonding. The sexuality of community is an expression of its joy, and its energy can be channeled to useful and creative purpose.

If it is so channeled, life in community may touch upon something perhaps even deeper than joy. There are a few who repeatedly seek out brief experiences of community as if such episodes were some sort of "fix." This is not to be decried. We all need "fixes" of joy in our lives. But what repeatedly draws me into community is something more. When I am with a group of human beings committed to hanging in there through both the agony and the joy of community, I have a dim sense that I am participating in a phenomenon for which there is only one word. I almost hesitate to use it. The word is "glory."

About the Author

Dr. M. Scott Peck is the best-selling author of *The Road Less Traveled*, *People of the Lie*, and *What Return Can I Make?* Educated at Harvard University and Case Western Reserve, he served in the Army Medical Corps from 1963 to 1972. Dr. Peck had a private practice in psychiatry from 1972 until 1983. He is a founder of the Foundation for Community Encouragement, a nonprofit organization for promoting community and world understanding. The recipient of the first Kaleidoscope Award for creative ministry in peacemaking, Dr. Peck travels extensively, speaking to religious groups and professional associations nationwide. He and his wife, Lily, who has been a psychotherapist, have three children and live in New Preston, Connecticut.