



Chapter VII

New Communities and New Community Networks

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A Call for a New Community

I can't predict what kind of community it will be, but the new community will be in reaction to the crushing bigness of systems.

— *Theodore Roszak (Krasny, 1994)*

Global forces—economic, political and technological—threaten communities in many ways. On the one hand, citizens may feel like they're part of an undifferentiated crowd with no personal identity. On the other hand, they may feel isolated and alone, disconnected from the human community. In either case, people—especially those with fewer economic resources—feel that they have little control over their future. The consequences of powerlessness, real or perceived, transcend the individual; society as a whole suffers, for it is deprived of social intelligence and energy which could be tapped for the amelioration of social and other problems. As a matter of fact, many of this century's most pressing issues—the environment, women's issues, sexual identity, and others—have been brought to the fore through the efforts of *citizens* (Habermas, 1996).

Disempowering the individual and the community was probably not part of a master plan any more than degrading the environment was. Yet in many ways this is what has happened. Rebuilding the community—like cleaning up toxic dumps or reclaiming buried streams—will be a long process that will require diligence and patience. Rebuilding—and *redefining*—the community, therefore, is not optional, nor is it a luxury. It is at the core of our humanity; rebuilding it is our most pressing concern.

Geographically based communities are a natural focus for addressing many of today's problems. For one thing, many current problems—poverty, crime, unem-

ployment, drug use, and many others—are concentrated in geographic communities. These problems are manifest in the community and are best examined and addressed by the community. Communities are also a familiar and natural unit. Smaller units can be clannish, unrepresentative, and powerless, while larger units are often too anonymous and unwieldy.

The old concept of community, however, is obsolete in many ways and needs to be updated to meet today's challenges. The old or "traditional" community was often exclusive, inflexible, isolated, immutable, monolithic, and homogeneous. Moreover, increased mobility coupled with widespread use of communication systems is de-emphasizing geography as the sole orienting factor in a "community." And, although problems may be manifested in specific geographic communities, the contributing factors of the problem may exist in New York, London, Tokyo, or other nodes in today's "Network Society" (Castells, 1996). A new community—one that is inclusive, fundamentally devoted to democratic problemsolving, outer-directed as well as inner-directed—needs to be fashioned from the remnants of the old community.

Defining a New Community

A new community is marked by several features that distinguish it from the old community. The most important one is that it is *conscious*. In other words, more than ever before, a community will need a high degree of awareness—both of itself (notably its capacities and needs) and of the milieu in which it exists (including the physical, political, economic, social, intellectual and other environmental factors). Further, the consciousness of the new community must be both intelligent and creative. The intelligence of a new community comes from its store of information, ideas, and hypotheses; its facility with negotiation, deliberation, and discussion; its knowledge of opportunities and circumstances; its ability to function collectively; as well as its application of technology and other useful tools. The creativity of a new community comes from its ability to reassess situations and devise new, elegant, and sometimes unexpected methods for meeting challenges to the local community and to the broader world to whom it belongs.

In addition to consciousness, the new community has both *principles* and *purpose*. Its principles are based on equity and sustainability, because a lifestyle based on overconsumption is illusory and ultimately self-defeating. Using these principles as a foundation, a new community also has goals and objectives that it strives to attain. Having purpose, the new community is oriented around *action*. This action must be consonant with its principles and it must be flexible. Projects and processes need continual reevaluation and adjustment, and projects and processes based solely on faith, tradition, or conventional wisdom will often be inequitable and ineffective.

As an inevitable consequence of its consciousness, principles, and purpose, the new community will have increased *power*. This power will be manifested in its ability to resist unwanted outside influences and to ensure desired outcomes. This new power could establish communities as rivals of government and business, or at

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