

SIGNS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

by

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Signs of Community Building*

Beyond intellectual concern for the possibility of community, some people work to enact it through their choice of living and working arrangements. Compared to the forces driving people toward individualism, their efforts seem small, partial, risky, and hopeful.

These notes summarize impressions from a visit with people involved in community building activities in the Phoenixville - Kimberton area of Chester County, Pennsylvania. My visit, on 1-3 March 1989, was organized by the Lifesharing Safeguards Project, a project funded by the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council to discover effective ways to insure the well-being of people living in intentional communities which include people with disabilities. Helen Zipperlin, a member of one such community and director of the project, inventoried local community building efforts along with her friends, invited people from each effort to spend a day reflecting on their experiences and their sense of future direction, and arranged for me to visit and talk with the people involved before the conference. I facilitated the group's discussion and, at Helen's invitation, presented these reflections to a large group of people from the area.

The Efforts

Participants in the conference are active in an interpenetrating variety of local efforts including:

- A community garden, in which families from a wide area buy shares to support the gardeners in return for a share of the produce.
- A law practice dedicated to assisting people to make good and en-

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during agreements and to preventing and constructively mediating conflicts.

- Several bio-dynamic farms -- whose farmers are committed to restoring and maintaining the living soil as a sustainable source of organic, pesticide free food-- and their associated distribution systems: a natural yoghurt company, operated cooperatively, which distributes the produce of one of the farms and operates a store; a bakery; and a milk distribution operation. These farms also teach their farming methods to apprentices.
- Two very different intentional communities which include members with disabilities and serve as the focus for a variety of cultural activities as well as shared households and shared work (Orion Communities and Camp Hill Village, Kimberton Hills).
- A citizen advocacy project dedicated to forming and supporting relationships for socially excluded people.
- A project to assist people with disabilities to find affordable housing and share households with people who are not disabled.
- An alternative school.
- A medical practice where physicians and nurses focus their complementary skills on promoting wellness.
- Several connected efforts to reclaim public space including renovation of historic buildings, the development of a local cultural and craft center, and the creation of a common recreational space.

Though physically dispersed throughout the area and organizationally distinct, these efforts interpenetrate. One of the intentional communities farms biodynamically. Another biodynamic farm offers work to intentional community members with disabilities. Partners in the law practice are active in the reclamation of public space. Children from many of the households linked to the intentional communities go to the alternative school. A number of people from each effort attend the medical practice and share in the social and cultural activities sponsored by the alternative school and the intentional communities.

The Context

Like many other desirable places to live within commuting distance of major cities, rapid growth shapes the Phoenixville - Kimberton area and threatens some of the qualities that make it a good place to move. Conference participants listed some of the changes that influence their community building efforts:

- widening highways and more car traffic

- a growing proportion of people who leave the area for their work --often both members of couples who live together
- more houses built by outside developers rather than by the people who will live in them or by local housing developers
- more money spent in malls and chain restaurants than in downtown, local business
- more people who will live in the area for a year or two who have chosen their location more because of house prices than because they want to settle down
- more people whose demand for city conveniences and opportunities in the country increases the rate of change in the economic and physical environment
- more widespread concern about crime and security
- more people who are strangers and more worry about strangers
- increasing housing costs more tightly squeeze poor people and people who work locally at relatively low paying jobs
- greater conflict among people who do not know one another plus more pressure on local government to deal with complex issues, thus greater pressure toward formal regulation and formal systems and greater pressure to withdraw from local politics
- deep hunger among growing numbers of people for personal involvement, cultural expression, good food, healthy recreation, and meaning

The shifts expressed in these trends set the challenge for community builders: *What can we contribute that will develop the positive possibilities in this rapidly changing environment?*

Most of the people involved in these community building efforts immigrated to the area --some from Europe, others from nearer by. They believe that community building proceeds from personal and organizational commitment to a particular place. Many have chosen --often at some risk-- to be where they are, doing what they are doing. Many speak of the place and its people choosing them. Thus they stand between people native to the area and people moving into new housing developments.

Some signs of community building

As the form of the notes suggests, I was struck by the characteristics that these diverse efforts have in common despite their independent origin and their lack of coordination mechanism. Though most people recognized one another, the conference was the first time people had gathered to talk about their community building efforts and a number of people were introduced for the first time at the conference. The facts that all these efforts arise in the same locality,

that many of the people involved know one another, and that a number share a commitment to Anthroposophy probably explain my impressions of unity within efforts with many distinguishing features.

Though these words are mine, and somewhat abstract, I have tried to express the common themes I detected in people's descriptions of their daily activities in terms that will somehow ring true to them. Because these signs arise from particular efforts, this is neither an exclusive nor an exhaustive description of the signs of community building. Reflection on the work of other community builders and by other observers would surely yield other perspectives.

- Through sustained work over years, efforts that build community touch fundamental, everyday concerns
 - to be healthy and to die well
 - to join in making a safe and welcoming home in which each can discover and express individual gifts
 - to support children's development and education
 - to have a safe place to be in times of confusion, crisis, or disruption
 - to eat in a way that is healthy for me and for the earth
 - to have times and places for gathering to share, to learn, to celebrate, to express and to enjoy the beautiful, and to welcome strangers into public life
 - to make agreements, resolve conflicts and ratify social arrangements in ways that respect relationships
 - to reclaim and reanimate the land and soil and disused or misused buildings
 - to learn how to do good work
 - by developing skills and sharing knowledge through apprenticeship
 - by sharing with colleagues
 - by experimenting to learn new ways to work, new ways to sustain economic support, and new ways to share the fruits of work
 - to reach out to people in other places --with recognition that these efforts are local expressions of ideas catching fire in many places--
 - to weave networks
 - to share information
 - to share support

- Community builders encourage the life and development of community by working to
 - shorten the distance between people's everyday life experience and the cycles of the living earth
 - reclaim everyday patterns of work, rest, meals, and entertainment through thoughtful use of time
 - increase the goods households and associations produce for themselves and decrease the amount of products individuals consume
 - discover the possibilities that arise from the limits of a particular place and time by raising basic questions through action
 - what is the best use of this place now?
 - what kind and what level of activity can this place sustain over time?
 - what is the right use of people's moral, economic, and cooperative power?
 - encourage investment in the future and thinking of the effects that present actions have beyond this lifetime
 - heal the divisions among people on the basis of obvious difference by making room for excluded people in every place and activity
 - encourage mutual help with each person contributing according to individual gift and ability
 - search for ways to use property and money cooperatively which move beyond usual relationships of consumer/producer, or employer/employee, or professional/client
 - encourage communal recognition of suffering and vulnerability, and thoughtful action to support one another rather than splitting care off from daily life and assigning responsibility to professional services

- Community builders transform themselves as they
 - invite others to create with them rather than simply being the objects of their good intentions or perplexed spectators
 - open their own minds and hearts to discover allies by seeking common interests and ways to work with other people and groups, including those who may seem "unlikely" at first
 - find energy for their work together without fighting enemies or putting down the unwashed

- seek wisdom to deal with the disappointments of broken promises, failed relationships, and failed projects
- appreciate the time development takes
- cultivate discernment and courage to deal with the dilemmas arising from tensions between
 - doing things right, according to shared and personal ideals, **and** doing it here with the resources available now
 - doing what can be done now **and** meeting all the community needs people can identify
 - celebrating what has been accomplished **and** recognizing shortcomings and failures
- create new social arrangements -such as support circles and citizen advocacy for excluded people- to fulfill what emerges as missing
- discover organizational and legal forms that better express their sense of the right relationship to property, employment, and profit such as land trusts, partnerships, and cooperatives
- awaken to the interconnections among various efforts to build community and look for ways to strengthen other efforts
- open to questions and challenges from one another and from outsiders
- seek the confidence to act in willingness to ask for and give support and assistance

Of course, none of these are signs of realized perfection. People committed to community building appear to be as fallible as any other group of people -- though they seem to be less bothered about recognizing their fallibility than many other groups. These are the signs of people working hard to make their ideals real so that they may contribute to sustaining and building the earth and the intricate, fragile webs of relationships that all life on earth depends upon.