Thirteen Ways of Looking at Community (With a Fourteenth Thrown in For Fre
by Parker J. Palmer

[Note] The title, and only the title, was inspired by the poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” by Wallace Stevens (see www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174503). The subtitle was inspired by late-night TV infomercials.

I. Whether we know it or not, like it or not, honor it or not, we are embedded in community. Whether we think of ourselves as biological creatures or spiritual beings or both, the truth remains: we were created in and for a complex ecology of relatedness, and without it we wither and die. This simple fact has critical implications: community is not a goal to be achieved but a gift to be received. When we treat community as a product that we must manufacture instead of a gift we have been given, it will elude us eternally. When we try to “make community happen,” driven by desire, design, and determination—places within us where the ego often lurks—we can make a good guess at the outcome: we will exhaust ourselves and alienate each other, snapping the connections we yearn for. Too many relationships have been diminished or destroyed by a drive toward “community-building” which evokes a grasping that is the opposite of what we need to do: relax into our created condition and receive the gift we have been given.

II. Of course, in our culture—a culture premised on the notion that we must manufacture whatever we want or need—learning to relax and receive a gift requires hard work! But the work of becoming receptive is quite unlike the external work of building communal structures, or gathering endlessly to “share” and “solve problems”: receptivity involves inner work. Community begins not externally but in the recesses of the human heart. Long before community can be manifest in outward relationships, it must be present in the individual as “a capacity for connectedness”—a capacity to resist the forces of disconnection with which our culture and our psyches are riddled, forces with names like narcissism, egotism, jealousy, competition, empire-building, nationalism, and related forms of madness in which psychopathology and political pathology become powerfully intertwined.

III. We cultivate a capacity for connectedness through contemplation. By this I do not necessarily mean sitting cross-legged and chanting a mantra, though that may work for some. By contemplation I mean any way one has of penetrating the illusion of separateness and touching the reality of interdependence. In my life the deepest forms of contemplation have been failure, suffering, and loss. When I flourish, it is easy to maintain the illusion of separateness, easy to imagine that I alone am responsible for my good fortune. But when I fall, I see a secret hidden in plain sight: I need other people for comfort, encouragement, and support, and for criticism, challenge, and collaboration. The self-sufficiency I feel in success is a mirage. I need community—and, if open my heart, I have it.

IV. The most common connotation of the word “community” in our culture is “intimacy,” but this is a trap. When community is reduced to intimacy, our world shrinks to a vanishing point: with how many people can one be genuinely intimate in a lifetime? My concept of community must be capacious enough to embrace everything from my relation to strangers I will never meet (e.g., the poor around the world to whom I am accountable), to people with whom I share local resources and must learn to get along (e.g., immediate neighbors), to people I am related to for the purpose of getting a job done (e.g., coworkers and colleagues). Intimacy is neither possible nor necessary across this entire range of relationships. But a capacity for connectedness is both possible and necessary if we are to inhabit the larger, and truer, community of our lives.

V. The concept of community must embrace even those we perceive as “enemy.” In 1974, I set off on a fourteen-year journey of living in intentional communities. By 1975, I had come up with my definition of community: “Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” By 1976, I had come up with my corollary to that definition: “And when that person moves away, someone else arises immediately to take his or her place.” The reason is simple: relationships in community are so close and so intense that it is easy for us to project on another person that which we cannot abide in ourselves. As long as I am there, the person I least want to live with will be there as well: in the immortal words of Pogo, “We has met the enemy and it is us.” That knowledge is one of the difficult but redeeming gifts community has to offer.

VI. Hard experiences—such as meeting the enemy within, or dealing with the conflict and betrayal that are an inevitable part of living closely with others—are not the death knell of community: they are the gateway into the real thing. But we will never walk through that gate if we cling to a romantic image of community as the Garden of Eden. After the first flush of romance, community is less like a garden and more like a crucible. One stays in the crucible only if one is committed to being refined by fire. If we seek community merely in order to be happy, the seeking will end at the gate. If we want community in order to confront the unhappiness we carry within ourselves, the experiment may go on, and happiness—or, better, a sense of at-homeness—may be its paradoxical outcome.

VII. It is tempting to think of hierarchy and community as opposites, as one more “either-or.” But in mass society, with its inevitable complex organizations, our challenge is to think “both-and,” to find ways of inviting the gift of community within those hierarchical structures. I am not proposing the transformation of bureaucracies into communities, which I regard as an impossible dream. I am proposing “pockets of possibility” within bureaucratic structures, places where people can live and work differently than the way dictated by the organizational chart. The most creative of our institutions already do this: e.g., those high tech companies that must organize efficiently to protect the bottom line and get product out the door, but must also create spaces where people can collaborate in dreaming, playing, thinking wild thoughts, and taking outrageous risks, lest tomorrow’s product never be imagined.

VIII. Contrary to popular opinion, community requires leadership, and it requires more leadership, not less, than bureaucracies. A hierarchical organization, with its well-defined roles, rules, and relationships, is better able to operate on automatic pilot than is a community, with its chaotic and unpredictable energy field. But leadership for community is not exercised through power (i.e., through the use of sanctions) that is the primary tool of bureaucratic leadership. Leadership for community requires authority, a form of power that is freely granted to the leader by his or her followers. Authority is granted to people who are perceived as authentic, as authoringtheir own words and actions rather than

proceeding according to some organizational script. So the authority to lead toward community can emerge from anyone in an organization—and it may be more likely to emerge from people who do not hold positional power.

IX. Leadership for community consists in creating, holding, and guarding a trustworthy space in which human resourcefulness may be evoked. A critical assumption is hidden in that definition—the assumption that people are resourceful. Standard organizational models assume that people have deficits and scarcities rather than resources: people do not want to work, so the organization must surround them with threats; people would not know what to do with the unexpected, so organizational life must be routine; people will try to cheat if given half a chance, so the organization must build walls of security. When we act on the scarcity assumption it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy through a process called resentment (small wonder!), and people are rendered incapable of community, at least temporarily, sometimes permanently.

X. Ironically, we often resist leaders who call upon our resourcefulness. We find it threatening when leaders say, "I am not going tell you how to do this, let alone do it for you, but I am going to create a space in which you can do it for yourselves." Why threatening? Because many of us have been persuaded by institutions ranging from educational to industrial to religious that we do not have the resources it takes to do things, or even think things, for ourselves (which, to the extent that we believe it, expands an institution's power over our lives). Many people have been convinced of their own inadequacy, and any leader who wants to invite them into a community of mutual resourcefulness must see this invisible wound and try to heal it.

XI. Seeing and treating that wound takes courage and tenacity: while the leader is calling followers to fullness, the followers are accusing the leader of not doing his or her job. Every teacher who has tried to create a space for a self-sustaining learning community knows this story: students resist on the grounds that "we are not paying tuition to listen to John and Susie talk, but to take notes from you, the person with the Ph.D.." It takes a deeply grounded leader—a leader with a source of identity independent of how popular he or she is with the group being led—to hold a space in which people can discover their resources while those same people resist, angrily accusing the leader of not earning his or her keep.

XII. In the face of resistance, an ungrounded leader will revert to bureaucratic mode: the teacher will revert to lecturing rather than inviting inquiry, the manager will revert to rule-making rather than inviting creativity. In the face of resistance, leaders will do what they are taught to do: not create space for others, but fill the space themselves—fill it with their own words, their own skills, their own deeds, their own egos. This, of course, is precisely what followers expect from leaders, and that expectation prolongs the period during which leaders of community must hold the space—hold it in trust until people trust the leader, and themselves, enough to enter in.

XIII. There is a name for what leaders experience during this prolonged period of patient waiting. It is called "suffering" (which is the root meaning of the word "patience"). Suffering is what happens when you see the possibilities in others while they deny those same possibilities in themselves. Suffering is what happens when you hold in trust a space for community to emerge but others lack the trust to enter the space and receive the gift. Suffering is what happens while you wait out their resistance, believing that people have more resources than they themselves believe they have. But leaders do not want to suffer. So we create and maintain institutional arrangements that protect leaders from suffering by assuming the worst of followers and encouraging leaders to dominate

them by means of power.

XIV. I have yet to see a seminar in suffering as part of a leadership training program. I can think of three reasons why. One, we train leaders for bureaucracy rather than community, no matter what we say we are doing. Two, the idea of leadership is still so steeped in machismo that we do not want to acknowledge a “weakness” like suffering. Three, suffering is a spiritual problem, and we want to keep leadership training in the orderly realm of theory and technique rather than engage the raw messiness of the human heart.

But leadership for community will always break our hearts. So if we want to lead this way, we must help each other deal with that fact. We might begin by viewing the problem through the lens of paradox, that spiritual way of seeing that turns conventional wisdom upside down. Here, “breaking your heart” (which we normally understand as a destructive process that leaves one’s heart in fragments), is reframed as the breaking open of one’s heart into larger, more generous forms—a process that goes on and on until the heart is spacious enough to hold both a vision of hope and the reality of resistance without tightening like a fist.

If we are willing to embrace the spiritual potentials of suffering, then both community and leadership, human resourcefulness and the capacity to hold it in trust, will prove to be abundant among us—gifts we have been given from the beginning but are still learning how to receive.

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□□□Old Thinking
□□□New Thinking
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□□□Community is a goal.
□□□Community is a gift.
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□□□We achieve community through desire, design and determination.
□□□We receive community by cultivating a capacity for connectedness.
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□□□Community requires a feeling of intimacy.
□□□Community does not depend on intimacy and must expand to embrace strangers, even enemies, as well as friends.
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□□□Community is a romantic Garden of Eden.
□□□Community that can withstand hard times and conflict can help us become not just happy but “at home.”
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□□□Leadership is not needed in communities.
□□□Leadership and the authority to lead toward community can emerge from anyone in an organization.
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□□□Suffering is bad and should be avoided.
□□□Suffering lets our “hearts break open” enough to hold both a vision of hope and the reality of resistance without tightening like a fist.
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