

# Common Ground: Holding Community Together

By Holly Lisle

An essay on the value of writing communities, as well as communities in general

**Communities are fragile.**

I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about how fragile they are until, in the wake of the attacks on September 11th, I saw a lot of them falling apart. Families, little towns, big cities and nations faced off against each other, divided by dark days, dark times, and bone-deep differences in belief, opinion, and goal.

Yet some communities fought to stay together in spite of their differences. I've had a year since then to think about this – about what makes a community, about why communities matter, about what we have to do to hold them together. And about the price we pay to hang on to the groups and the people we love.

Most people don't really have a lot in common with each other – not on an individual level, not on a group level. We may share a common language, or a common religion, or common interests, but the things that make us different – the things that work to separate us – usually far outweigh our common ground. Human nature drives us to seek out people like us, but the mathematics of population and the sheer size of the planet have always made finding those people a tough proposition.

# So what are communities?

**First and foremost, they're the families we choose.**

They may or may not be the ones we were born into, but if you're truly a member of a community, you're there because you belong. You have found people like you, and you have made hard decisions about your priorities to be with those people. In true communities, you matter as a person, and other community members care what happens to you, cheer when you succeed, commiserate when you fail, and help you keep going.

**Communities are sources of affirmation.**

We all have dreams and goals, hopes that we hold close to our hearts and only share cautiously, if we think the people with whom we're sharing them will be receptive. We don't want to be laughed at, we don't want to be shamed. The communities to which we belong share our goals, and let us know in a hundred different ways that they're important, and meaningful, and worthwhile. That we are not wasting our lives. That our dreams matter.

**Communities are places to grow and develop.**

People used to belong to guilds that furthered their goals. They apprenticed their children to community members who knew valuable skills and who agreed to pass them on. Real communities still offer this – they share not just their values and their ideals, their culture and their beliefs, but genuine skills that their members can use.

**Communities are places to create a future.**

As you can find family and acceptance and skills in a community, so you can find your future there. Communities – full of people who share common ground – offer substance to that most overused of buzzwords, networking. Within a community, you'll find people who know where you can find

work, meet a potential mate, find shelter, locate entertainment. Communities offer sheltered coves in which people can grow roots, flourish, and live.

## **Communities matter to us for a lot of reasons.**

**The world outside the community is not a friendly place.**

Most people outside their shelter **will** think your dreams are foolish, that you're wasting your time, that your beliefs are wrongheaded or dangerous, that the way you live your life is deluded at best, criminal at worst. It's easy to deal with that sort of endless criticism if your community says you're fine – much harder if you're trying to go it alone.

**Futures and dreams are hard to hang onto.**

The easiest thing in the world is to settle – to accept work that we don't hate too much, to find a mate with whom we have little in common except proximity and a shared sense of desperation, to close our eyes to the dangerous path of dreams and desires and tell ourselves that real people never do the things we yearn for anyway. If your community shares your dreams and ambitions and members within it have already done what you hope to do, it becomes easier to hold out. To hang on. To keep believing.

**Good families are hard to come by.**

Not everyone got June Cleaver as a mom, or Robert Anderson of **Father Knows Best** as a dad. We did not all grow up in the Brady Bunch, and for a lot of us, our families are the ones we've made. Communities can offer a buffer zone between us and not only the hostile outside world, but sometimes the hostile one closest to us.

So clearly, good communities are worth hanging onto, keeping

alive, and fighting for.

## **How do we hold a community together?**

**First, we focus on our common ground.**

In those first few moments following the 9-11 attacks, common ground was *We think terrorism is wrong, and slaughtering innocents with airplanes is wrong*. That made, briefly, for some wide common ground, for very few people overall approve of terrorism. So for just a while, much of the world shared community.

In the **Forward Motion Community**, our common ground is much smaller, much rarer. We're bound by a passion for words and a passion for books, for reading and for writing. This is an odd passion, and finding others who share it has always been an effort. So when we find such kindred spirits, we tend to hang onto them. All communities have their agreed-upon common ground – the fire around which all members gather. The smaller and more intimate the fire, the closer the members will huddle, and the closer the community will be.

**We share our trials and goals.**

Most communities have plenty of people on the outside willing to tell the community's members they're crazy, deluded, wrong, or doomed to failure. For the people inside the community, sharing pain and triumphs, rejection and success reinforces what were doing, what we believe in, and what we share.

**We help each other succeed.**

Strong communities are filled with people who are successful, who want to see others succeed as well. We take care of our own; we teach them, help them, and then turn them loose to make it on their own – but we're there when things get rough.

Bad times come to everyone, but a good community can help a whole lot of people fly with a shared set of wings.

### **We minimize our differences.**

Personal and national differences destroyed any world sense of community only days after the terrorist attacks. Those same differences – over whether violence solves anything, over the role of the US, over a hundred other things – drove wedges between us. Unlike the world community, our little writing community pulled back. We focused on our common ground and agreed not to speak of our differences. It was a hard decision, because passions ran high on all sides. But some things once broken can never be put back together again – and communities live and breathe. And they can die. We decided to do what we had to do to keep ours alive.

This brings to light the part of communities that is hard to look at – that the strengths and weaknesses of communities are the same.

## **The price we pay for community is also the benefit we reap.**

### **Communities build walls around themselves.**

They say, in effect, if you are like us, you can live within our walls and we will shelter you and feed you and love you and keep you safe. We need walls. We need shelter. Exposure to the elements kills us, physically and spiritually.

But communities also have the power to say, You are not like us, you are not welcome here. And sometimes, grown too safe and grown too sheltered, they can turn away those who would benefit them.

Not every person belongs in every community. The world cannot all be friends. But in our search for *like me* we must not

forget that common ground can sometimes be found in surprising places.

### **Us makes Them.**

The very existence of insiders creates outsiders. Strong communities create their own resistance and build their own detractors, because they will develop strong cultures, mores, ideals and histories – and those who do not like the culture or the mores, or agree with the ideals, or who take offense at the history can become very loud about their dislike. In physics as in life – pressures equalize, and every action creates an equal and opposite reaction. The tighter a community and the more of a culture it shares, the stronger will be its resistance from outside.

### **Standards create exclusions.**

All communities must make moral choices. They must say, *We are for this, we are against that, we will remove from our midst those who act in these proscribed ways.* If they do not do this – if they do not keep their community culture alive and healthy and support their ideals, their community will die. Moral choices create divisions even within communities, though, because there is no community with more than one member anywhere that can take a stand that will be universally supported. People are more different than they are alike, and even within communities, people find themselves on the outside of issues, at odds with the prevailing culture, cut off in various ways. No community can support every one of its members all the time, and because of this, resentments grow, hard feelings erupt, and portions of the community will fracture off and move away. This fracturing is always hard, always painful – and very rarely preventable or fixable.

### **Uniformity fights diversity.**

The more alike community members are, the more solid the community becomes. And, unfortunately, the more ingrown it

becomes. A community can become an impenetrable thicket, closed to all new ideas and new approaches, and gradually strangling from the inside. Conversely, the more diverse a community becomes, the weaker and less capable it is of supporting its members, because it shares less and less common ground. Goals and dreams get lost, walls fall, and the shelter becomes a windy plain, with members eventually scattering toward something stronger. We need walls. We need shelter. But not too much.

I have no easy answers. Every day, watching our own community grow and change, I find myself watching the focus, watching the common ground, fighting to make my mark on the culture, to shape it toward my own ideals and dreams. Everyone else who is active in the community does the same thing. As long as we do – and as long as we remember to guard our doors (but not too tightly) and to cherish our culture (but not at the expense of turning away the good that exists outside our walls), we will continue to grow and thrive. We'll continue to shelter our people. We'll continue to have a place where we can say – and know clear to our bones that it is true – **I belong here.**

(Reprinted from **Together We Stand: Community About Community Through the Lens of September 11th**)

**NOTE:** If this article resonates with you, and you want to meet other writers who share your passion and who are working in a friendly, supportive environment, come hang out with us and make progress on your writing in my free writing community.

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