We, the lonely people

Man needs "community," a place where he feels at ease, accepted
for what he is. But has our addiction to mobility, privacy,
and convenience cost us the sense of community we seek?

by Ralph Keyes

AN ENGLISHMAN I know grew up in a very small village in Yorkshire. He says the most striking quality of the town, and the thing he misses most, was the feeling of *being known* there. He said it wasn't even a spoken thing. Nobody would say anything out loud about your beating your wife. But they knew, you knew they knew, they knew you knew they knew—and in that there was comfort.

Today we talk about our "loss of community" in city and suburb. When we try to be more specific about just what "community" means, we usually think first of a place, the place where we live. But when we consider where we find a "sense of community," it's rarely where we live. We use the word interchangeably, but it means two different things.

A sense of community is what we find among the people who know us, with whom we feel safe. That rarely includes the neighbors. It wasn't always so. For most of history, man found his sense of community where he lived, with the people among whom he was born and with whom he died. For some that remains true today. But most of us in city and suburb live one place, and find "community" in another. Or nowhere.

So many of us want back the more intimate sense of community, the one where the grocer knew our name and the butcher could comment on meat and life.

Sixty-nine per cent of 200 Bostonians surveyed in 1970 agreed that "stores are so big these days that the customer gets lost in the shuffle." But 81 per cent believe that "supermarkets are a great advance over the corner store." It's this confusion, this ambivalence, which confounds our quest for community. We yearn for a simpler, more communal life; we sincerely want more sense of community. But not at the sacrifice of any advantages which mass society has brought us, even ones we presumably scorn.

We didn't lose community. We bought it off. And rediscovering community isn't a matter of finding "the solution." We know how to do it. It's more a question of how much we're willing to trade in. I could find a "'Mom and Pop" store if I really wanted one. But I don't. I prefer a supermarket's prices and selection. Also the anonymity, the fact that I'm not burdened by knowing the workers.

Even as we hate being unknown to each other, we crave anonymity. And rather than take paths which might lead us back together, we pursue the very things which keep us cut off from each other. There are three things we cherish in particular—mobility, privacy, and convenience—which are the very sources of our lack of community.

In nearly two decades of studying top corporation executives, industrial psychologist Eugene Jennings has found an increasingly close relationship between mobility and success, leading to what Jennings calls "mobicentricity." "To the mobility-centered person," he explains, "movement is not so much a way to get someplace or a means to an end as it is an end in itself. The mobicentric man values motion and action not because they lead to change but because they are change, and change is his ultimate value."

Those studying communes have found a curious paradox. Experiments in communal living are top-heavy with the root-seeking children of nomadic corporation men. Yet these same utopian ventures are witness to a perpetual flow from one to the next, communards changing communes just as their fathers transferred between corporations.

There's a critical difference between this new nomadism and the more primitive kind. Traditional nomads move in community. As a Gypsy or Bedouin shuttles from place to place, clansmen are always along. For such a nomad, to move physically isn't to move psychologically. They carry their community with them. Our new nomads travel lighter.

The worst part of mobicentricity may not be the moves themselves so much as the certainty that one will move again, and again, and again. Why get involved with people where you are, when you know you'll soon be leaving them? Why get close to anyone, when you know

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in advance that making friends—close friends—only means more pain at parting?

It all leads to a kind of airline "stewardess syndrome"—smiling warmly at strangers as you part after a few hours, or minutes, as if you had shared the intimacy of a life time. While constantly on the move, appearances become all. Without time to come to know each other, we must depend on outer signals. Eventually it becomes hard to remember that there's an inner person not so easily exhibited, a person more important than any badge or secret handshake. The worst part of mobicentricity is being doomed to travel about, seeking one's identity in the eyes of near strangers.

Mobility is a major enemy of the community of intimate friendship. I'm not clear where it is cause and where effect: whether we're afraid to get close because we're always moving on, or whether we're always moving on because we're afraid to get close. Mobility has also made a major contribution to the decline of neighborhood life, or our community of place. But in that it's had help, in particular from our love of privacy.

Privacy as an ideal, even as a concept, is relatively modern. Media critic Marshall McLuhan says it took the invention of print to tear man from his tribes and plant the dream of isolation in his brain. Historian Jacob Burckhardt says that prior to the Renaissance, Western man was barely aware of himself as an individual. Mostly he drew identity from membership in groups—family, tribe, church, guild.

But since the Renaissance especially, Western man has sought increasing amounts of isolation, of distance from his neighbors. In the United States, with more land in which to seek elbow room, and with more money to buy it, the ideal of the unfettered individual, rugged, free, and secluded, has reached its zenith. Howard Hughes, the famous recluse, is only the logical conclusion, an inspiration to us all.

Not all cultures value isolation so. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall points out that neither the Japanese, who live within paper walls, nor the Arabs, whose rooms are huge and few, have a word for "Privacy."

Increasing numbers of us suffer from an "autonomy-withdrawal syndrome," according to the architect-planner C. A. Alexander. Most people, explains Alexander, use their home as an insulation against the outside world, a means of self-protection. Eventually this withdrawal becomes habitual, and people lose the ability to let others inside their secluded world. What begins as a normal concern for privacy soon resembles the pathological. It's not only that we don't know our neighbors; it's more that we don't want to.

We not only use our homes to avoid each other, but we can do the same thing within the home, with just a little help from modern technology. I once gave a speech on "The Generation Gap" to a women's club. In the discussion afterward, one 50ish mother stood up and said: "I'll tell you what brought on the whole thing—dishwashers. That's right, dishwashers. I got to know my kids better, they told me more, when we washed dishes together. One would wash, another rinse, and a third dry. We'd fight but we'd also talk. Now that we have a dishwasher, there's no regular time when we get to know each other."

Our household conveniences, our whole drive for a convenient life *has* cut us off from each other. The cooperation and communication which used to accompany life's chores is being built out of our social systems.

Rotary: quest for community

AUTHOR RALPH KEYES is no stranger to Rotary club meetings. THE ROTARIAN *asked the sociologist if a Rotary club met his definition of a community. This is his answer. What is your response to this same question? The editors welcome your comments.*

ON A RADIO show recently, I was asked to "prove" man's need for community. My questioner, a professor of political science, wondered if this notion might be obsolete. He speculated that the need for intimacy in small groups was an anachronism holding back our continued economic progress. Perhaps this is true. I don't know how to *prove* otherwise. I only know the need for community which exists within me. Strongly. And I see the same need in others who are searching for a sense of community in their churches, communes, and clubs. Anachronistic this search may be. But man's quest for community seems no more quenchable than his continuing thirst for water.

Service clubs such as Rotary strike me as one such quest. "Community" may not be the stated purpose for gathering. But isn't it the real agenda? And shouldn't it be? No longer living in the tribes or villages where man gathered for most of his existence, we seek fellowship, a *sense* of community other than where we live. We may create more diverse agendas as our reason for coming together. But isn't the basic need simply to *be* together? "We want to be socially acceptable," a member of another service club once explained, "so we buy eyeglasses for kids. But the real reason men join service clubs is that we're a gregarious people."

This perspective might sound like a jab at service clubs. I don't mean it to be. Why can't the sense of community that develops when people meet regularly be reason enough to do so?

With our U.S. ideal of the lone gunfighter, admitting one's need for community can be suspect. This is especially true for men. We hesitate to ask for companionship directly. And instead of saying, "I'm lonely. I need some attention," sometimes we're forced to put a rock through a window, or ask the doctor about the vague ache in our chest.

A sense of isolation, of not being in community, is rooted in U.S. history. This country was founded, after all, mostly by those who left a community to set out on their own. Such restlessness does not promote a sense of community. It is perhaps due to our lack of social moorings that Americans are the world's champion joiners. Service clubs like Rotary are a U.S. invention. Belonging to no community in the geographic sense, we seek its substitute in clubs—preferably ones whose membership we can pick up and carry elsewhere. The Encyclopedia of Associations lists more than 16,000 reasons for gathering in this country—everything from the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Quartet Singing in America to Left-Handers Against the World. "Americans will join anything in town," Will Rogers once said. "Why, two Americans can't meet on the street without one banging a gavel and

18

Eating, according to contemporary nutritionists, has become less and less a family affair and more and more a matter of "slot-machine snacking." According to one estimate, 28 per cent of our food intake is now in the form of snacks outside mealtime. The sit-down family dinner seldom takes place more than three nights a week in any family. That seems a shame. Our family meals were warm, together times—times when the talk rivaled the food for attention. My best memories of home take place around the dining room table.

With our comings and goings inhibiting friendship, a love of seclusion eroding our neighborhoods, and our passion for convenience atomizing the family, it's no wonder we feel a "loss of community."

More than any single thing, automobiles unite the triumvirate of values—mobility, privacy, and convenience—which are wrecking our sense of community. Autos are at once our main agent of mobility, the most private place to which we can retire, and a primary source of convenience. When one asks what it is that we must trade in on community, the answer could very well be: your car.

The great, overlooked seduction of this earth module, the car, is privacy. Cars and bathrooms are the only places where most urban/suburbanites can be completely and blissfully—alone. And a car is better than the bathroom. No one can knock and tell you to hurry up.

The car itself has had a lot to do with cutting us off from each other by sealing us in cocoons on wheels and making it easy to drive away from each other. But its greater impact may be in the environments we erect to suit the car, environments built for mobility, privacy, and convenience.

Mobility has a built-in paradox. We move on in search of change. But the more we move, the more identical things become in every region. And the process feeds itself. The more we move the more same things become. The more same things become, the easier it is to move.

We fret about this growing sameness for a variety of cultural and esthetic reasons, but without considering the comfort uniformity provides for a people constantly on the move. Since retail franchises grew up after World War II right along with the auto and freeway explosion, they have housed themselves in very visible buildings which have the advantage of being easily seen from a speeding car.

No matter how they clothe it or what they call it, the uniform gathering places—franchises in particular—are basically marketing trust. When we lived on a smaller scale, we would learn which merchants were trustworthy. Living now throughout the country, we can only grope at symbols, and consistency is the best substitute for intimate knowledge. Fewer and fewer of us stay anywhere long enough to know the neighbors, join a club, or become regulars at a bar. Nor do we want that much commitment. But we do need intimacy, something a little deeper than the promiscuous friendship of a smiling franchise clerk.

The only thing new in our drive to belong is the degree of disconnectedness we feel, and the added weight we put on our associations to be not only community but also family.

A biker speaks of his motorcycle gang, the Aliens:

"Our chapter is like a brotherhood. Strong. Strong. We're real tight. One of us cries, we all cry. One laughs, we all laugh. That's the thing about the Aliens. We're a

calling the other to order."

Among those willing to accept isolation as the price of sophistication, it is fashionable to ridicule the search for community. But anthropologist Margaret Mead once chided her colleagues for their condescension toward the urge for gathering. "Not until he has been marooned," Mead wrote, "his train missed, no taxi available—and driven 60 miles across bad roads in the middle of the night by someone who belongs to another chapter of the same national organization does he begin to realize that the tie of common membership, flat and without content as it is, bolstered up by sentimental songs which no one really likes to sing but which everyone would miss if they weren't sung, has an intensity of its own; an intensity measured against the loneliness which each member would feel if there were no such society."

Here, perhaps, is the need service clubs can meet best: the need for community. This need alone is reason enough for gathering. The only question is: do they succeed? Do such clubs meet their members' need for a sense of community?

I've defined "community" as the place where I'm known. Among those who know me, both my virtues and my faults, I feel at ease. In such a setting I can take off my shoes and get comfortable. To me this feels like community. With no such setting I'm less of a person.

This definition is one I suggested in *We, the Lonely People*. Others have different definitions. What we share in common is a need for community. The only question is, what kind? Do we prefer the marginal commitment of showing up regularly at a bar, or the total commitment of a monastery? Or the weekly

gatherings and opportunity for service provided by Rotary?

In my book I suggested that if the need for community was reason enough to gather, perhaps dispensing with all pretense and seeking community directly—for its own sake—might be the best approach. Since writing that I've grown in respect for the need of larger purpose. The simple need for companionship is an important part of any group's agenda, and should be. Yet I've seen too many people gather for companionship alone—in communes, say, or in ongoing encounter groups—and fail to stay together. The need for community alone is not sticky enough glue. There must be further purpose. Here is where service clubs seem to have particular insight. Emphasis on both service and fellowship can offer both a sense of immediate community and a larger reason for remaining together.

But I also wonder how well such gatherings meet their members' deepest need for community. Real community. The kind where you can express sadness or madness, as well as gladness—knowing others won't walk out the door.

I shared supper not long ago with a longtime Rotarian. And I asked him, "Is Rotary for you a community?" What struck me in his response was not a yes or no, but that my companion wasn't sure what I meant. Yes, he said, Rotary met weekly. And yes, they engaged in service projects. There certainly was good fellowship. But community? What did I mean by that?

A good question. It's one I'd like to pose more broadly. What *does* "community" mean to each of us? And to the groups where we belong? And having decided what it means, how well are we providing for it?

—RALPH KEYES

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family." The Aliens. A family.

After completing the Dale Carnegie course, an insurance executive boasted, "Now there's a lot more cooperation in our department . . . We enjoy working together so much we're really more like a family."

A family.

When a word becomes that popular and that diverse in the ways it's used, some of the original meaning has obviously been lost. Lacking a real community or family doesn't mean we can live without one. To the contrary, we need it more, and seek it everywhere—in shopping centers, at laundromats, in court, through associations or Weight Watchers, Dale Carnegie or the Aliens—any gathering today must provide some family feeling for its participants, or risk extinction.

We do seek community. There's no question about it. But also we're scared of it. So we seek a safe community, one in which we needn't be fully known. We want to preserve as much as we can of our privacy, our conveniences, as well as the freedom to pick up and move on.

We want to be known, whole, yet. . . .

If any or all of our approaches worked, we wouldn't be suffering such an epidemic of loneliness.

The minimum question about whether a group of people is really a community for me is: "Would anyone notice if I didn't show up?" And where the answer is "yes."

We keep remembering the small towns and stores because we want back some of their qualities—manageable size, familiar faces, a sense of being known. Few of us will ever again know the kind of total community which intermingled place and kin, work and friends, and fewer of us want to. Feeling guilty about this is no help. Far more helpful is to find out where it is that we do feel community today, and to set about enhancing that feeling without getting hung up on obsolete notions of what a community should be.

An ideal community would be like a good family: the group from which one can't be expelled. Or like Robert Frost's definition of home—the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in. But that's ideal, and few of us will ever build such a community.

I've defined my attainable community as "the place where it's safe to be known." This has meaning for me, because trusting people to see me as I am is so hard, and it feels so good when I do. It feels like community. And that kind of community can be built in a range of settings, from a commune to a bar or a church.

The elements which strike me as especially important for building a commu-
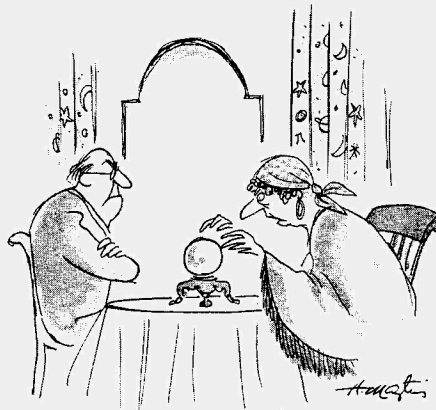
"You will never put down roots because you are not clubbable."

nity include manageable size, a willingness to be exclusive, acceptance of oppression, and some modicum of commitment.

Size is of the essence. Manageable numbers are basic to any group of people hoping to get close. Trust can only be built among familiar faces.

The need to exclude is one of the harshest realities with which would-be community builders must cope. It grates against every humanistic instinct to openness, hospitality, and tolerance. But there's no alternative path to a truly intimate community.

I'm not saying that it's necessary or even good to exclude all outsiders. A community with completely stable membership would get as dull as Main Street very quickly. But the crucial point for an intimate community is that it controls its own access, chooses new members, and is not just like a hotel.

There is an inescapable relationship between brotherhood and oppression. Any group setting out to build community must anticipate this relationship and deal with it. Being in community doesn't make you more free; it takes away some of your freedom in exchange for the warmth of membership. Ignoring or denying that trade-off just makes it harder to confront.

To deny the relation between community and conformity, to call them two different things, is to make community that much more difficult to achieve. To be in community requires the sacrifice of at least part of your individuality. To be-

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After-dinner speeches
The phrase, "It goes without saying,"
Puts me one step ahead.
Because then I know for certain
That it will be said.
I stay in my seat, unmoving,
For I can also depend
On the statement, "In conclusion,"
Not meaning the end.

—Gail Cooke

long to a group you must accept the group will at least sometimes, like it or not. For me and for anyone seeking community, it then becomes a question of how much autonomy to trade in.

A community simply cannot be built from people crouched and ready to take off, like foot racers awaiting the crack of a gun. Commitment is basic. There is just no way that a community can be forged from people trying to make up their minds about whether to belong, community-seekers who keep their bags packed and ready. Fear of commitment may be the biggest barrier to the rediscovery of community, including marriage.

When I say "commitment," I don't mean a signature in blood, nor even a long-term contract. What I do mean is a willingness to stay through friction, to work on problems when they occur, to be a little stuck with each other. That may not be "commitment" according to Webster's dictionary, but it's more than many of today's "communities," even today's marriages, enjoy.

We don't have to be together as we once did, so now we must choose to be together and find the courage to say so, to look around at a group of friends and say, "I want you to be with me. I need you to be my community. And I'm willing to make some sacrifices for it."

Once we've made that commitment, with a small group which will stay small, one which is willing to trade some individuality for company, an infinite variety of tools can be found to keep a community alive.

Something I've realized only slowly is that seeking "community" in the abstract dooms the search. Community is people. I find community only when I find other people. I'm open to a group only when I'm open to its members. When I start looking for some mystical "community," I usually miss the people.

The problem of community, which sociologist Robert Nisbet calls "the single-most impressive fact in the 20th century in western society," is relatively modern. For most of man's history, group life was a given, and grew naturally out of the ways we were forced to be with each other—to live, work, wash clothes, and die.

This is no longer true. We have less and less necessity to be together, and fewer ways of knowing each other, while our need for community remains constant. So we're forced back on the only immutable reason for joining hands: the human need for company. Without place, without cause, common work or religion, most of us must make that humiliating admission: I can't live alone.

Once someone, once I, can take the risk, break the ice, and say how I really feel, it's always amazing how many others turn out just to have been waiting their turn. Then the community begins. ◉