

What is community?

Margaret Atwood

novelist/poet

The United States has promoted individualism so much that the responsibilities of giving to a community, and vice versa, have been trampled by rampant individualism. Canada hasn't gone in that direction of extreme individualism: my mortgage; my bank account; no pies when I hurt my leg, and I won't bring pies to you. Americans tried to weld some sort of fellow feeling in all of this--to shed their ethnic roots and be part of an American identity but, paradoxically, an individual. Community as once proposed meant all Americans. That was the myth. All were not included in it.

Richard Rodriguez

writer/commentator

America is not based on a communal notion. It's a low church Protestant culture whose major discovery was the individual face-to-face with God. Our greatest myth is about a boy who leaves home with a runaway slave, has no mother and a drunken father. We don't know how to share our individualistic culture. There's nothing more American than for me to say I'm better off because I'm Mexican, and I want to exclaim my distinction. If Mexicans, people of mixed blood, really want to be subversive, they should say "I'm going to marry you, or your daughter. You'll eat my food, and we'll be friends."

Susan Faludi

journalist/feminist

The ideal community for Americans is often an escape from political engagement. Europeans are so much more engaged. Community here is running away to the suburbs. The media has become our pseudocommunity. People don't belong, but if they're part of a sound bite, they feel part of a larger world. It's the false idea of the media as a public forum, an idea encouraged by politicians. People take their intimate stories on TV talk shows, replacing political engagement and community, which would actually bind people, with psychology and therapy.

E. L. Doctorow

novelist

Communities appear temporally rather than spatially. They form as circumstances demand, and when the emergency is over people go back to their semi-estranged mood. Communal expressions that really matter on a day-to-day basis are probably made by people who have no thought of community. A surgeon who only wants to make money and live well and has a lousy bedside manner still contributes. The Korean grocer on the corner who works hard trying to survive may feel a foreigner, but the store is a contribution to the neighborhood. I don't know if you can ask for more.

Noam Chomsky

political analyst/linguist

Community is PR bullshit designed in the 1930s by the corporations, when they became terrified by the collapse of their society brought on by the Wagner Act and the labor movement. They developed new techniques to control the population and inculcate the concept of living together in harmony--all Americans, all working together: the sober workman, the hardworking executive, the housewife. And Them--the outsiders trying to disrupt. Community is a bit of a joke. Only labor has succeeded. That's why business hates unions. They can create real community and democracy.

Ram Dass*author/spiritual activist*

Our inordinate concern with individuality has marked our group identity. I'm part of the problem. The '60s were about individual freedom, and we threw out the baby with the bath. We're dealing with the effect of imbalance; we're so focused on separateness that we've lost interconnectedness, the inherent gregarious nature of humanity where we need others to give us meaning. The web of violence in this culture is clearly connected to the breakup of these types of systems. But look at the Crips and the Bloods, now meeting together as a new kind of community structure.

Amy Tan*novelist*

My community was more like an extended family. My father was the minister of a Chinese church, so it was as if my whole world was Chinese. The sons of the women I called Auntie were like brothers to me. I know I can go up to a person on the street who is also Chinese and ask questions and get information, because there is a sense of community. We are both Chinese people in America: That's community based on being different. In China that wasn't true. It's too diverse, regional. I identified more with Shanghai people than with Hong Kong people, for example.

Frances Moore Lappe*activist/writer/political theorist*

People are looking for community in all the wrong places. It's not goodwill and like-mindedness, it's daily experience in workplaces and neighborhoods and churches and civic groups. The Sonoma County Faith-Based Community Organizing Project is a prime example of concerned people coming together--farmworkers, African-Americans, whites of all classes, professionals, nuns, accountants, lawyers. They got together candidates for the school board, for example, and judged them on how well they listened to constituents' concerns. It's a two-way process of public officials accepting accountability and citizens taking an active role.

Barbara Kingsolver*novelist*

There's no shame in depending on each other. There's heroism in ordinariness and connectedness and using relationship skills to get through difficult times, as opposed to the isolated heroism of the cowboy. Look at the things in your living room or refrigerator and realize they were made by thousands of people on different continents. The lemons we buy at the grocery connect us with a food chain, with people coming up from Mexico, being sprayed by pesticides. It's easier to see just a lemon, but only when we see the whole line can we feel connectedness and responsibility.

Harry Edwards*sociologist*

We need a new definition of community. We're a nation of nations; we're not homogenous like Japan. We need to look at pluralistic reality in terms of all interests, including white male, while recognizing the concerns of those in the minority opinion. It's good business to have everybody involved in the national life. A black community should produce students who can go to the universities equally--without affirmative action or Head Start--and it's in our mutual interest to see that the competence and quality are there to provide that equal opportunity.

Ellen Goodman

journalist

There has always been a tension in the United States between individualism and community. The economy deals with us as individuals: You achieve success or you don't. We typically divided America into men as individualists and women as caretakers of the family and keepers of community--until women had to go to work and saw themselves as individuals rather than as members. The baby boom generation broke from family; there were so many of them it seemed like the whole country. Now that they have families they have more longing for community.

Theodore Roszak

historian/author

Our culture builds bigger and bigger--bigger forces, corporations, and trading alliances. The thrust toward the global in government, communications, and business goes against the human need for smaller, face-to-face communities. There is a disintegrative quality to reaching out beyond neighborhood and nationality lines. When computer networks are organized and we have 500 TV channels, common culture will disintegrate; we will have smaller enclaves for smaller groups. 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.