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SEEKING COMMUNITY

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Community Destroyed

In Savage Inequalities Jonathan Kozol describes the flooding of basements, backyards, and school kitchens with raw sewage, the accidental releases of toxic chemicals from the Monsanto and Pfizer chemical plants upwind, the lead tainted soil, and the crumbling, leaking, understaffed schools of East St. Louis. This is home for thousands of poor black children and their families. The chemical plants who still enjoy the labors of some of the adults in East St. Louis have incorporated their own company towns to avoid paying taxes to educate these children. The predominately white towns on the bluffs, who live above the flooding and pollution, pay for their own schools and ”do not welcome visitors from East St. Louis” (Kozol 1991: 9).

Otters living along and eating fish from the Columbia River are showing skin lesions and abnormal reproductive organs. Once teeming salmon runs have dwindled to nearly nothing. Chemical laden effluent from paper mills flows into the river; silt run off from clear-cuts coats gravel bars on its tributaries.

Are these two scenarios totally separate, one a failure of humans to care for and respect and share with one another, the other just the cost of doing business in a global economy? Or are they connected? The children of East St. Louis and the otters and salmon of the Columbia are not seen by most who are entangled in the global industrial economy as being worthy of caring and respect. Their problems are seen as the result of doing business, their own failure to adapt to a changing world, or a temporary problem that can be fixed by improving technology. This has happened through the isolation and destruction of communities. Wendell Berry points out that ”communities are destroyed both from within and without: by internal disaffection and external exploitation...The destruction of the community begins when its economy is made - not *dependent*(for no community has ever been made entirely independent) - but *subject* to a larger external economy” (Berry 1993: 125-126). By community Berry means not only the people but also the plants and animals of a place: ”a locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local economy, and local nature” (p. 120). In both East St. Louis and on the Columbia we have an escalating cycle of both internal disaffection and external exploitation. How can you feel an affection for place when it is poisoning you? How can you know local nature when local nature is destroyed to make the chemicals those on the bluffs and here along the Columbia believe they need to continue their lives? How can you have a local culture, a knowledge of how to live well in this place, when your

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attention is always drawn to national consumer culture? How can you have local economy when you must pay the rent to absentee landlords, when what you make has no or little use to you where you live? Why do you need all those pesticides when the soil is already too poisoned to grow food? How can you survive by selling or trading 100,000 rolls of toilet paper locally everyday when not enough food is grown here to feed all the people who live here?

Berry says, "the global economy does not exist to help the communities and localities of the globe. It exists to siphon the wealth of those communities and places into a few bank accounts" (p. 129). Since this global economy is based on a myth of scarcity we, believing we are independent from other individuals and groups, are struggling for advantage. When we have it, we keep it. We are willing to sacrifice other communities, other people, other creatures to keep it. Those on the bluff won't reduce the amount they spend on their children's education so there can be equity for the children of East St. Louis. People along the Columbia, and elsewhere in the U.S., don't want to give up soft white toilet paper so that otter and salmon can live healthy lives again. But we are connected to all those degraded and destroyed communities; most especially to the local one, *this* place. Berry says we need to realize that "we live in a society that exploits, first, everything that is not ourselves and then, inevitably, ourselves" (p. 170).

This exploitation of communities has been going on for a long time. The African ancestors of the children of East St. Louis were ripped from their homes to become commodities of the slave trade. A trade established to supply the needs of industrial agriculture's cotton and sugar cane plantations in the American South and the Caribbean. Later the landless descendants of these slaves were drawn north to places like East St. Louis to provide cheap labor for factories and processing plants but now many of those factories have moved elsewhere and the remaining chemical factories don't have enough jobs for those who remain.

Any of us who have some power are all perpetrators and victims of this system. In his essay "The Ecological Crisis is a Crisis of Character" Berry says:

> I cannot think of any American whom I know or have heard of, who is not contributing in some way to destruction. The reason is simple: to live undestructively in an economy that is over-whelmingly destructive would require any one of us, or of any small group of us, a great deal more work than we have yet been able to do. How could we divorce ourselves completely and yet responsibly from the technologies and powers that are destroying the planet? The answer is not yet thinkable, and it will not be thinkable for some time - even though there are now groups and families and persons everywhere in the country who have begun the labor of thinking it (Berry 1977: 18).

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In the next sections I will explore this labor of thinking ourselves forward and back into real community.

Community Defined

Community starts with home, not just a house or apartment, but place, nature. Not nature as "the environment", that which *surrounds* us, but nature that is inside and outside and passing through with every breath, every drink, every bite of food. It is the people, the local ecosystem, the plants, the animals wild and domestic. Belonging to such a community is possible only in a particular place. Wendell Berry says, "a healthy community is like an ecosystem, and it includes - or it makes itself harmoniously a part of - its local ecosystem. It is also like a household; it the household of its place, and it includes the households of many families, human and nonhuman" (1993: 155). He adds there can be no true community beyond local place, "it is an idea that can extend itself beyond the local, but it only does so metaphorically. The idea of a national or global community is meaningless apart from the realization of local communities" (p. 120).

Being in community means knowing intimately your neighbors, both human and non-human, who passes through, who stays all year. It means knowing the cycle of the seasons, the history of this place, both human and natural (but of course they can't really be separated), the lay of the land, the ways water flows.

One of the essentials of healthy community is reciprocity: giving and getting, getting and giving. It is the glue that holds it together; it is how interdependence is manifest. The key to understanding this interdependence, this cycle of reciprocity, is accepting that we, as animals, must kill to eat and that each of us will also one day become food for someone else. Gary Snyder says, "if you think of eating and killing plants or animals as an unfortunate quirk in the nature of the universe, then you cut yourself from connecting with the sacramental energy-exchange, evolutionary mutual-sharing aspect of life. And if we talk about evolution of consciousness, we also have to talk about evolution of bodies, which takes place by that sharing of energies, passing it back and forth, which is done by literally eating each other. And that's what communion is" (1980: 89). But because most of us get most of our food from distant sources we fail to see this connection; we can remain ignorant of our interdependence. We can forget or deny the fact that plants and animals give their lives so that we can get continued life. In a healthy community this reciprocity is seen, understood, accepted, and celebrated everyday. Through the simple practice of saying a grace before eating Snyder says we acknowledge that "eating is a sacrament" (1990: 184) and complete the cycle of reciprocity: we give thanks for the food we are getting that is given us through the deaths of our plant and animal neighbors.

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In such a healthy community each generation must pass on the knowledge/wisdom of living in this place to the younger generation. Since the survival of the community is dependent on the health of the place (especially since the community is really the place) these ways of living must be sustainable for not just one or two generations (as our modern ways have been) but many generations.

This kind of education would not be separated from the rest of daily life but embedded in it; you learn how to garden by watching and helping gardeners, you learn to hunt by going along on the hunt, you learn to cook by cooking, you know the plants by seeing them and hearing their names time after time, you learn to tell stories by hearing stories told and then telling them yourself.

Another essential of a healthy community is trust. Berry says that

> a community does not come together by covenant, by a conscientious granting of trust. It exists by proximity, by neighborhood; it knows face to face, and it trusts as it knows. It learns, in the course of time and experience, what and who can be trusted. It knows that some of its members are untrustworthy, and it can be tolerant, because to know in this matter is to be safe. A community member can be trusted to be untrustworthy and so can be included. But if a community withholds trust, it withholds membership. If it cannot trust, it cannot exist" (1993: 161-162).

We are obviously not talking about superficial shifts in habits here, like remembering to recycle and reusing plastic bags (not that these are unimportant), what we are talking about are what Chet Bowers calls deep changes. This means "we need to begin to evolve, as cultures, into new directions that do not involve the need of individuals endlessly to pursue conveniences and personal meaning through consumerism. This means that many of our guiding ideals will need to undergo change" (1993: 156). But we are also talking about the way of life lived for most of human history. A way of life still practised by indigenous peoples in what Snyder calls primal cultures.

Community Described

None of us can yet say we live in such a community in place. But there may be pieces in the communities (in the narrower human focused sense we usually use the word) where we live and work. By examining them we can see what is healthy and where we can begin to make deep changes.

I live and work in the Knappa area of eastern Clatsop County in northwestern Oregon, about twenty miles from the mouth of the Columbia River. It is actually four somewhat separate areas starting with Brownsmead along the northeast,

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Knappa and then Svensen in the middle, and then Burnside on the northwest. Highway 30 runs through from east to west paralleling the Columbia River to the north; along the south rises the Coast Range ridges of Nicolai and Wickiup Mountain. The land ranges from diked pastureland in Brownsmead to hilly pasture and forest lands in Knappa and Svensen. Burnside overlooks the Columbia from a high stretch of bank. Six creeks drain into the Columbia. Furthest east Gnat Creek drains off the north side of Nicolai Mountain and descends down through Brownsmead. An unnamed creek is next, forming the unofficial boundary between Brownsmead and Knappa. Next is Big Creek which drains Wickiup Mountain's north slope. The next three creeks drain the southwest flank of Wickiup: Ferris, Bear, and Mary's. Within the area are large managed forest lands held by the state, Boise Cascade, and Hampton Timber. The cutting cycle on these lands is stated to be around seventy years. But there are other smaller holdings that have been recently cut on shorter cycles. Most lands are now in third or fourth growth timber.

Besides being the home to 1,800 to 2,00 humans the area is home for four herds of elk, numerous deer, raccoons, moles, shrews, mice, otter, muskrats, and beavers. Osprey and bald eagles nest near the river; ducks and geese pass through and winter in Brownsmead. During heavy storms shore birds and gulls come in from the coast. Robins, blackbirds, vultures, finches, juncos, sparrows, crows, ravens, and wrens are year-round residents. There are trout, perch, catfish, suckers, and crayfish living in the creeks and sloughs. A few steelhead and salmon still return to Big Creek and Gnat Creek to breed. In the forests and clear-cuts on Wickiup and Nicolai there are black bears, bobcats, and even, some say, cougars and spotted owls. In addition to these there are garter snakes, alligator lizards, salamanders, Pacific tree frogs, bull frogs, and newts. The native plant communities have been replaced or invaded, especially in the farmed areas, by European and east coast grasses and weeds. The humans have planted exotic trees, flowers, and food plants in their gardens and yards. The farm lands are now home to dairy and beef cattle, mink, llamas, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, ducks, horses, and even a camel in Brownsmead named Mark (but that's another story). In the woods there are native banana slugs; in the yards, gardens, and pastures there are abundant and hated (by humans) European slugs.

Farming used to be more diversified. There are now only five dairies in Brownsmead and their milk is taken to Tillamook or Portland to be processed. Corn, peas, flower seeds, cabbage used to be grown and shipped from the area. Now a couple of farmers still grow corn and blue berries for local sale and a few people grow other vegetables for a natural food grocery in nearby Astoria. There are two commercial holly farms in Knappa. Many families grow gardens and raise chickens or cows or pigs to supplement their store-bought food.

People get their water in one of two ways. Most are connected to one of the three water districts which draw ground water from springs and wells on Nicolai Mountain or Wickiup Mountain. The rest pump their water from wells or

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springs on their own land. Waste water is handled by septic systems or, in a few cases, the sloughs.

Electric power comes mostly from the dams up river. People burn wood, oil, propane, and natural gas for heat or use electricity. Garbage is either hauled to Astoria, and then on to a landfill at McMinnville, or composted, or burned, or sometimes dumped off a logging road. To get anywhere adults drive or ride in a car or pickup. Kids walk or ride their bikes or get a ride from their parents. When they turn sixteen many kids get their own vehicle. Most kids watch television although a few Fundamentalist Christian families and a few others who also question the mainstream culture's values do not have TVs.

Fifty years ago if you lived in this community you were probably of Scandinavian descent (most likely Finnish) and your family made its living logging, fishing for salmon and sturgeon in the river, working in one of the canneries in Astoria, farming, or a combination of these. Today most people here are still most likely white, still likely Scandinavian but there are a few Hispanics and one black family. The salmon canneries are shut down, a few people work intermittently filleting bottom fish or processing crab. There are still several thriving logging operations in the area, one is building a new office/shop in Knappa. The largest employer in the Knappa area and beyond is James River Corporation's Wauna Mill ten miles to the east. This is a "world class" paper mill manufacturing toilet paper, paper towel, and office papers. It not only relies on local timber for wood chips but has even recently imported logs from Chile. So, driving around the area you will see many bright yellow-green signs stating, "this family supported by the timber industry." While a few people still gill net for salmon and sturgeon on the Columbia, if and when it is allowed, if someone still fishes they go now to Alaska or fish for bottom fish or go crabbing in the Pacific. There are three restaurants, two grocery stores, two gas stations, a hardware/auto parts store, a can warehouse, and a few other miscellaneous businesses in the community. There are three churches, several stables, and a gun club in the area. Many people drive to Astoria (10 to 25 miles east) or Longview or Portland to work. People are employed in local stores, offices, and construction/repair companies. Most families are in the middle class, with a few in the upper class (the owners of the logging companies, and a few lawyers and doctors) and a few in the lower class (the cannery workers, farm hands, gas station attendants, and the unemployed). Few people now gain their whole living from farming. Of about a hundred households in Brownsmead only five of those earn a living strictly by farming.

The Knappa Schools, Hilda Lahti School (K-8) with about 400 students and Knappa High (9-12) with about 150 students, provide a focus and central gathering place. Musical programs in the winter and spring at the grade school draw parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and neighbors. Dramatic productions at the high school also bring in large audiences. Sporting events at both buildings are popular, especially basketball and baseball. There is a strong 4H

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program which begins in fourth grade and is supplanted by an equally strong FFA (Future Farmers of America) organization at the high school. When you go to the Clatsop County Fair you will see many Knappa kids showing their cows, pigs, sheep, and goats.

Hilda Lahti School, where I teach, shares its campus with the high school.

Besides the two buildings and a large expanse of parking lot there are playing fields and a large expanse of third growth forest which, rumor has it, will be logged soon. But rumor always abounds in Knappa and is wrong as often, maybe more often, than it is right. These woods are not used much during school except for running during some P.E. classes. Deer often graze just outside the classrooms on the grass between the building and the woods.

The school's kitchen serves its lunches on washable trays. Unused food is dumped, ending up in the landfill at McMinnville. Human wastes and used dishwater are handled by a new "state-of-the-art" million dollar septic system. Office paper and cardboard are recycled. Incandescent light bulbs in the gym and hallways were recently replaced by more efficient bulbs.

Each classroom teacher is, as in most public schools, the main adult that students interact with day in and day out. Sometimes there is a parent helper, usually a mother, or a program assistant, less often is there a grandparent or other community member. Students and teachers spend nearly all of their time in their classrooms interacting little with the rest of the human and natural community. Knowledge about the local ecology is not explored much at school nor is local geology, history and prehistory. Questions like "where does our food come from?" and "where does our garbage go?" are not a part of the curriculum.¡T¿

Instruction in the school leaves knowledge about the nature of language and communication at a tacit, taken-for-granted-level. The fact that the language of schools is the language of the dominant mainstream middle class culture is not addressed. The school does not explicitly tell students that the norms of literate school language is the language of those in positions of power, as the African-American educator Lisa Delpit (1995) advocates, nor does it go deeper, as Bowers says we should, to help students develop communicative competence. Communicative competence is "not only the ability to speak the language and use it according to the norms of the cultural group, but also the ability to participate in (even to initiate) the public discourse about problematic aspects of social life" (1993: 180). Communicative competence is not a district learning goal. There is no attempt to unearth the root metaphors of this language and culture: the belief in progress and hierarchy, the individual as autonomous center of intelligence, consumption, and responsibility, the view of nature as outside of and separate from humans, an experimental orientation toward life that sees change as inherently good - favoring the new over the traditional, a faith that technology and rationality can eventually solve all problems, a linear view of time.

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While the local ecology and the central role that language plays in shaping experience are not parts of Hilda Lahti's curriculum it is important to remember that "all education is environmental education. By what is included or excluded, emphasized or ignored, students learn that they are part of or apart from the natural world" (Orr 1992: 90). Thus many local boys out with their BB guns or .22s see crows as targets not neighbors and people can say, "if it weren't for those damned spotted owls we could cut as much timber as we wanted."

There are obviously some aspects of healthy community in the Knappa area. There are still many somewhat healthy natural ecosystems in the area which give the humans many animal and plant neighbors. There are traditions of gardening, food storage, animal husbandry (interesting use of husband), hunting, and fishing which may have some problematic aspects, like use of pesticides and hunting and fishing only "for the fun of it" without respect for the prey. The community's passion for sports illustrates reciprocity: The athletes give the crowd excitement, well trained performance, they get attention, support, and adoration (which can also be problematic). Living in a rural area children have opportunities to explore nature, see the plants and animals. They have more of an awareness of place than most urban and suburban children get.

There are some blocks to developing an explicitly more ecological curriculum. Ecology and especially "environmentalist" is a dirty word to many who make their living in the timber or paper industry. For example, my neighbor, who works at the paper mill has a T shirt with this logo: "Earth First! We'll Log the Other Planets Later." On the other hand there are areas that can be developed without putting one's job on the line. I'll explore some of these in the next section.

Community Developed

First of all the barriers between the school and students and the rest of the community must be at least made more permeable. This means going outside more getting to know the neighbors, the native plants and animals and exploring how they affect us and how we affect them. It means learning what a water shed is, tracing the flow of water from Hilda Lahti's septic drain fields and rain run-off down into Ferris Creek and on into the Columbia and the Pacific. It means expanding the school garden from not only flowers to growing vegetables. It means learning about death and decay and the cycling of nutrients by composting some of the uneaten lunches in worm bins. It means studying phenology (the study of periodic biological phenomena such as flowering, breeding, and migration), noting when the first swallows arrive and when the last leaves, when the trilliums begin to bloom, when the elk start mating. It also means trying to find people who can come to the school to help teach students about some of the local history and traditions like gardening. Some of that is already done

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through 4H and religious traditions are passed on in the community's churches and homes.

The curriculum can explore questions that get at both how we are connected to our local ecosystems, land forms, and watersheds, how we are connected to other communities, and some of the implications of those connections. Where does our drinking water come from? Where does our food come from and how does it get here? Where does our garbage go and what happens to it then? Where does our energy come from and how does it get here? Where do our clothes, toys, books, etc. come from, who made them, how much did they get paid?

A more difficult thing to do is to find elders who can pass on some of the wisdom of living in this place to students. The problem is that most older people are not elders; they are themselves participants in the mainstream culture which values the new not the old. Some spent their lives over-cutting, over-grazing, and over-fishing. Their stories are important to understanding what happened to this place but we also need to find people who can pass on sustainable practices. Teachers seeking to do this must walk carefully trying to find true elder knowledge in the older generations while not negatively judging those who knew no other life than industrial logging or fishing. It is important to remember communities can be damaged and destroyed by disaffection from within. Teachers reject the lives of the grandparents and great grandparents of their students then the students are likely to reject the teacher. This is not that teachers should never speak up about destructive ways of being but that they must do it carefully to try to maintain trust.

By learning about indigenous peoples of other places (e.g. the Navajo, Hopi, or Tlingit) students can begin to see that there are other ways of living that do not have the same assumptions and consequences as our way. Here is an opportunity to learn about the roles elders play. Bowers points out that the forms of spirituality of primal people "help us put in perspective our own sacred cosmos, with its consumer and technological perspectives" they portray a "shared sense of the wholeness and interdependency of all life forms" (1993: 205-206). He notes that "it has been suggested that the enfolding of the primal person within a more complex and interconnected sense of order has contributed, in many instances, to the culture's ability to live in ecological balance" (p. 214). Learning about these cultures is an excellent opportunity to explore the differences between orality and literacy. For example, Bowers says,

> knowledge claims in literate traditions are based on a process of justification, which requires an elaborate language code for presenting arguments and the 'objective' evidence of other experts, they also strengthen the stratification process that is an integral part of schooled literacy. Oral traditions, on the other hand, accept a wider variety of knowledge claims and sources of authority: formu-

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> laic sayings, living traditions, persons who have special standing in the community, sacred texts and stories, and so forth" (1990: 170).

Another source of authority in oral traditions is personal experience or observation. This is perhaps why white professors and students (operating in the literate tradition) could not hear or understand the criticisms of process approaches to reading and writing Lisa Delpit (1995) (operating in an oral tradition) brought up based on her experiences and observations as a person of color. By teaching about how primal peoples live and how they think about living, students may begin to see choices they did not see before. Teaching about these cultures does not mean co-opting these cultures and turning students into pseudo-Hopis or Tlingits. It does mean showing them that living in a community of place is possible and it will hopefully make them aware that we all have ancestors (if we trace our roots far enough and deep enough) who lived the old ways.

Another aspect that can eventually lead to developing community of place is by giving students communicative competence. To help them not only realize that literate school language is the language of power for the dominant social groups but that the effects of this language on thought and action go deeper. Pointing out to students, "this is seen (by those in power) as the best way to talk and write so, if you want to have power in this society you better learn it" is not enough. A teacher needs to begin to explore how the metaphors we use shape our views of justice, nature, time, work, intelligence, and technology create East St. Louises and malformed otters. Without this deeper work students will only perpetuate the problem, unquestioningly joining the global economy and further marginalizing other communities. Without communicative competence there can be no hope of completing the labor of thinking a way forward and back to the wisdom of living in a community of place.

Communities Connected: Dream or Delusion?

Do these attempts to build community in rural Oregon connect in any way with ending the exploitation and destruction of community in East St. Louis? Or do we just write off the children of that city? We, as consumers, as participants in the global economy (however conscious or unwilling), share responsibility for what is happening in East St. Louis as long as we buy products that include chemicals made there. We, as members of a national public, share responsibility by not speaking up in our public discourse about the root causes of East St. Louis. And we, as members of communities share responsibility when we deny connection to the other beings (and the place) of our communities which makes it easier to ignore when it happens in communities far away. Communities, like the beings that create them, are also interdependent, connected through cycles of water and atmospheric gases and the movements of people, animals, plants. So we here in Knappa should remember: everybody everywhere needs and uses

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water; and water falling as rain runs downhill and flows into Ferris Creek, the Columbia and on to the Pacific. It then evaporates and gets carried east as clouds on the jet stream until it drops as rain onto Minnesota farmland and washes down the Mississippi, down past East St. Louis, and on from there. One day it will get back here. So let's keep it clean.

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