

Family and Community “Lite” 2010

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In behalf of specialization and opportunity, the populations of western countries, and especially their professional, leadership “class,” have become more and more mobile over the last several generations. It is often the case that professionals move their home base seven to ten times over the course of their lifetimes. These moves begin with relocation by family during upbringing and continue with college, university, and career/work changes of situation. And over the generations, these moves have come to cover greater and greater distances – state to state, region to region, coast to coast, country to country, continent to continent.

Prior to the 19th century most individuals lived and worked throughout their lives within 20 miles of where they were born. Indeed, dialect differences can be notable across relatively short distances in Europe exactly because the members of families tended to “belong” to the communities and villages where they were born and reared and because natural geological features limited contact between groups. War, famine, disease, economic hardship and antisocial behavior were the major forces that drove individuals to seek distant locations, not merely the option to do so. By contrast, it is now the exception that a college educated individual lives in the community or immediate area of where he or she grew up. And fewer and fewer children even live in the same community among the same peers throughout their childhood and adolescence.

The great advantage of this vastly increased mobility is the freedom it brings. When opportunity arises elsewhere, there are no obligations that stand in the way of picking up the family and moving wholesale to an area where it is often the case that only the “breadwinner” knows anyone in the new local community. Career and economy drive most of this movement, and improved standard of living for the nuclear family is the most common consequence – better salary, larger home, better neighborhood, better schools. And with more resources available, the family can foster the needs of its children more fully with better education and enhancement options so the offspring can pursue their independent goals wherever they may lead. In this setting, professionals are not restricted in their choices and no one is obliged to remain to serve the needs or interests of others. In fact the expectation is that children will leave home and that career will take them far beyond local reach. And adult children can no longer expect their parents to remain in their homes or communities since parents may move due to career or retirement choices for relocation in entirely

different areas of the country or world. Indeed, retirement has come to be associated with a significant move for a great many professionals.

Great Freedom - - - But! There are losses associated with this freedom. Family is reduced to the nuclear unit of parents and their children instead of the larger extended family of surrounding siblings, aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents. The individual family is mostly on its own to face all challenges without being able to rely in any immediate way on the advice, input, assistance and resources of other extended family members. The security that extended family provides to buffer economic, health and child rearing problems is greatly reduced in this free and mobile social condition.

While family shrinks in the extent of its influence in the modern setting, community is weakened in the process as well. Mobility is the great mixer bringing people of all different ethnic, linguistic, racial and religious groups into immediate proximity of one another. Diversity and mixing may be a good thing at one level, but it is a very significant impediment when it comes to engendering community. When we add to this picture the fact that intensive agriculture and world commerce and industrialization based on cheap energy accommodate vastly increased human population density, most of this mixing occurs in urban centers where the huge scale of the diverse population is a challenge for humans to identify with as community. Suburbs suggest themselves as an answer to the community need within the urban situation, but they rarely in fact produce community, other than for some children who are brought together through their shared education experience. Adults in their separate homes on separate lots often barely know the names of their neighbors across the street, and they typically share little of their life experience with those around them. Instead they create their own little home-based fiefdom from which they interact with friends defined by limited interest criteria while they await the next career move of the breadwinner[s]. In the modern context, mobility, diversity and size all dictate against the formation of community at the scale that humans have identified with throughout 99.9% of their history.

With another move always looming and with all family responsibility resting on the parents, neither time nor inclination exists for most professional adults to invest in community membership beyond relatively superficial involvement. Families have great freedom, but they are also relatively isolated, and social commitments to mostly newly developed friends lack the detailed knowledge of the other person over time and are discretionary rather than obligatory. In this situation, there is little expectation of being able to depend on others for more than very modest and temporary support.

Freedom can be exhilarating, but it can also lead to isolation and loneliness! Family and community relieve isolation and provide social connection, assistance, and security, but they bring with them responsibility, obligation and commitment – all obstructions to the full exercise of individual freedom.

The answer for many professionals in the midst of the contrary draws of freedom and social commitment is to retain freedom and to pursue what I call family and community “lite.” Family lite takes the form of occasional reunions and visits among parents and siblings a few times a year. These occasions are mostly celebratory in nature with shared outings for a day or two and opportunities to recall and assess common past experiences. The interaction is more intimate than among friends and opinions and advice may be offered, but there is little actual obligation involved. Mostly the family “catches up” on its disparate elements, a kind of gesture toward unified involvement without much actual consequence. Prolonged illness or deaths in the family bring more instrumental interaction, but these occasions are few and focused among the more immediate family members. Family lite is family “at a distance” where interaction is episodic and real commitment is for the most part not sought or tested.

Real family is extended family next door, down the block, across town. This is family where visits are frequent and regular and where members depend on one another for substantial assistance and advice. Many life experiences are shared within the real family network and this network usually exists in a stable sense of place. In the modern setting this real family is on the wane, and family lite is as close as many come to the real family norm that was pervasive for 99.9% of human existence. In this earlier setting, family and clans were tightly knit groups that shared most everything on a daily basis including a recognized territory and a particular geographical home base. Family members were dependent upon one another for their very survival, and obligation, responsibility and commitment were mandatory and more or less absolute. The individual had a place and some freedom for individual expression and achievement, but this freedom was circumscribed by commitment to family and place. Family lite is mostly a modern ritual gesture in the direction of recognizing this human family heritage. From an individual freedom point of view, family lite is the way to go, but there is in fact little real family in it.

In the modern context, community is so weak for most professional couples during the early years of marriage and young family that it rarely achieves even community lite status. Usually, community lite arises once the children are headed for independence and when the expectation is that the parents will

remain in their community for some time. Parents, often women before the couple enter retirement, become involved in social service organizations whether secular or religious in nature. Monetary contributions, which are often the extent of community involvement previously, are supplemented at this time with social benefit activity. These activities can become quite extensive in behalf of the whole range of local community needs – food banks, prison release programs, battered women's centers, United Way campaigns, adult literacy programs, adolescent mentoring programs, Habitat for Humanity projects, etc. There is great need for these activities and much social good is achieved through them. But neither individually nor collectively do they often result in real community. Mostly they are efforts to catch those who are most desperate and who are failing to make it in a world where the path to success is defined by the pursuit of individual freedom.

True community is realized in common commitment to work with all others to achieve a full range of shared goals for the duration, most often in a recognizable place or space. Social programs may help individuals recover to the point where they can make this commitment, but they do not themselves generate community. Community lite confuses social and economic assistance with community, and it almost never gets to a real community consequence. And community lite does not require a commitment to real community from those involved in these assistance programs. Community commitment means fundamentally identifying with the collective and its goals and both promoting and participating in activities to reach these goals and persisting for the long term because one regards this community as HOME. Community does not result from a temporary commitment to work with select others on achieving some goals in a place that is just currently where a person lives. Individual community members cannot walk away from real community, but community lite allows for exactly this walk because the person can support and participate in social benefit programs anywhere he or she lives. Community lite is a way to appear committed to community while still permitting the individual the freedom to walk away at any time without significant consequence.

Humans are social animals. Our success as a species is tied to our social orientation which allows for cooperation, which in turn accounts for our individual security. Without a surrounding, committed group of at least extended family size, we are vulnerable for our survival. A worldview that makes individual freedom paramount is aberrant and only possible in the modern setting where community sponsored law and law enforcement support the safety of the individual as he or she moves among relative strangers in "foreign" places. Most individual freedom extremists forget that it is the community that provides the modern umbrella for the freedom they are so avid

in promoting. Rightfully, the privilege of individual freedom only comes together with commitment to this supporting community, the very community these extremists love to hate.

In the traditional setting, extended families often combine in clans and bands, which frequently join together in a tribe that could occupy a territory over a considerable period of time. Sub areas of this tribal territory are more or less assigned to the families, clans and bands. Community is achieved at each level beyond the extended family, but the tribe is usually community in the largest traditional sense. These real human communities begin with real families as their foundations. They share language and common life ways, and their culture connects them to the land in origin legends which identify the source of family, band and tribe in the culture hero's or first ancestor's emergence in a particular local place. Tribal identity is fused to place, and cooperation among families, clans, and bands is essential to survival of the tribe. Real family and real community are the norm, and while individual achievement is recognized and celebrated, it always occurs within the greater commitment to band and tribal identity and community. In this context, personal identity is more a matter of tribal membership than of individual being, a fact reflected in naming where a person is known first by their tribal and family name and secondarily by their personal name – still common in many Asian cultures. Individual freedom does not trump community in the traditional context, and there is no family lite or community lite unless an individual wants to risk being banished.

In the modern context individual freedom reigns to the point where even the nuclear family is under threat with a 50% divorce rate. When the nuclear family is unstable and there is no real surrounding local community, individual identify is all that remains. We are on our own, living in large and diverse metropolises that are very hard for individuals to identify with except in the abstract. Professionals tend to jump from personal identities defined by their individual achievements through identity suggested by family lite, to identity defined by ethnic group or region or nation. All of these higher order notions of community require little direct activity beyond belonging to fraternal organizations, attending national holiday parades, paying taxes, perhaps voting, and “volunteering” for military service. As Americans, many professionals share an abstract, loosely defined social identity that impinges little on their individual freedom. The obligations of being an American or a southerner or a Texan are really minimal, but we often invest a lot of significance in these labels as if we want to claim the benefits of belonging to a real community. National patriotism is more an ideal than a reality, a fact reflected in community within national military service, which relies more on creating identity defined by the obligations of the extended

family [platoon] than of the nation – exactly because “belonging” to the nation is such a dubious abstraction.

Americans are starved for real community, but for the most part they will not give up some of their freedom to actually participate in a real family or community. Instead they look to make it on their own, try to hold their nuclear family together, subscribe to family and community lite, and invest identity in mostly fictional large-scale “communities” that do not require more than a monetary obligation. If this approach does not work, they may retreat to manufacture community in groupee cults, exclusive gangs or fundamentalist religious sects – the modern extreme versions of bands and tribes. Ironically in these extreme forms of retreat many give up virtually all of their cherished freedom and end up paralyzed and virtually enslaved. We invite these fictional and gang family and community extremes because we cannot compromise our freedom and commit to living in communities of traditional tribal scale – the real village or small town.

We need real community at all levels, and while we try, we cannot skip the fundamental level of community in local place and jump to the large scale abstractions and achieve the real experience of community. At some point as the world moves ever closer to unification, we will have to accommodate real community at all levels and relinquish most of what can be viewed as the “fiction” of our individual freedom. At the very least, we need to offer ourselves an opportunity as Americans for better balance in our lives between the forces for individual freedom and the forces obliging us to community. In our current state, we are mostly distracted and confused when it comes to this issue and much too inclined to fall for the anti-government populists with their extreme individual freedom rhetoric. There is no real family or community at any level that is sustainable following the individual freedom principles these advocates espouse. As our human numbers accumulate, our only real option is to embrace real family and real community and work hard to make it realizable first at the local level. We can then extend our grounded sense of local community up the social scale to eventually encompass all of humanity. But without the local level experience, with its very long human heritage, community at all higher levels is hollow. The modern condition of family lite and community lite leave us in an illusory limbo, which is no adequate answer to this challenge or need.