

*The challenge of organizations is to build a strong community through celebrating diversity within the community boundaries and then to take that strength across boundaries to create collective action.*

## IS RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY AN OXYMORON?

By Reba L. Keele

*The spiritual is not the religious. A religion is a dogma, a set of beliefs about the spiritual and a set of practices which rise out of those beliefs. There are many religions and they tend to be mutually exclusive. That is, every religion tends to think that it has dibs on the spiritual—that it's The Way. Yet the spiritual is inclusive. It is the deepest sense of belonging and participation. . . . One might say that the spiritual is that realm of human experience which religion attempts to connect us to through dogma and practice. Sometimes it succeeds and sometimes it fails. Religion is a bridge to the spiritual, but the spiritual lies beyond religion.<sup>1</sup>*

—RACHEL NAOMI REMEN

### FOCUSING ON BOUNDARIES OF EXCLUSION

THE TITLE OF THIS PAPER POSES THE QUESTION of the validity of the term *religious community*, and the answer has far-reaching implications. Clearly, if a "community" is defined minimally as a group whose boundaries of membership are known, the answer to the question, "Is religious community an oxymoron?" is, "of course not." A "community" has clearly delineated boundaries that show who belongs to the group and who does not.

However, I am interested in exploring the consequences to individuals and the planet of using a definition of community that focuses on boundaries of separation or exclusion. Many religions find it difficult to understand that boundaries can be inclusive as well as exclusive. Only when "religious community" is used as a tool to build a larger spiritual community is it not a danger to individuals and to the planet. True spiritual community requires ever more inclusive boundaries with the recognition of the connectedness of us all.

In order to find critical commonalities with those diverse peoples *outside* their boundaries, communities need to recognize and embrace diversities *within* their boundaries. To save ourselves, our concept of community must move beyond boundaries to the *bondedness* of different communities working toward a superordinate goal.

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INITIALLY, focusing on definite and clear boundaries helps create a group. Berkeley Sociologist Robert Bellah describes one kind of boundary in *Habits of the Heart* with which Mormons can resonate:

A community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, a religious group includes those who meet regularly to worship, who share a history, and who use their organization's boundaries to signify identity. Those *within* the defined boundaries probably consider their group a religious community. British sociologist Anthony Cohen describes such a community in Focaltown, Newfoundland.

The Pentecostals conducted themselves as a closed community. They operated their own schools, proscribed participation in religiously mixed social events, excluded themselves from most of the town's many voluntary associations, and concentrated themselves within a discrete residential section. They pa-



tronized only certain shopkeepers and offered their political allegiance to only one of the community's competing factions. . . . Pentecostalism was a highly assertive—indeed aggressive denomination. Its members publicized their activities widely, denounced outsiders, and loudly deprecated those beyond its boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, a similar definition of “religious community” led to many of the triumphs and disasters of early Mormonism. With such a view of community, the larger needs of the common good are less important than protecting boundaries that separate the insiders from the outsiders. The focus is strongly on the exclusionary boundaries of the community. In Focaltown's Pentecostal community, the critical role of boundaries was to *exclude* those not part of the group in order to keep it pure.

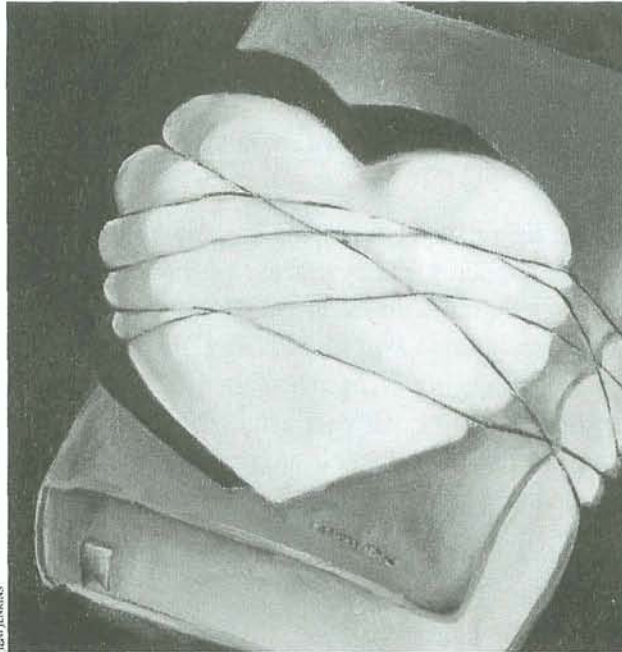
Of course, it is essential to have boundaries to know the limits of the community and to preserve its core values. Certainly consistency cannot be maintained in any organization that does not “bound” its influence, its purposes, and its membership. While necessary, such boundedness is not sufficient for the common good, since the maintenance of exclusive boundaries has been the motivation for many of the most heinous crimes committed throughout human history. And the victims have included insiders who violated community norms as well as outsiders who refused to enter the fold. Consider the fear of those who have left or challenged groups such as the Klan, Scientology, and various polygamist groups.

The logical next step toward a definition of community goes beyond membership and considers the quality of the experience for persons within the boundaries of the organization. For example, ecologists Robert Ornstein and Paul Erlich suggest that one hundred people may be near the maximum number of human beings with which a person can interact at more than a superficial level.<sup>4</sup> Economist Peter Danner notes that true community

requires that each member enjoys status; that, given a hierarchy of functional roles and responsibilities, each contributes to and shares in the common good, and that this common good fosters certain basic human

values which all in the community espouse, each in an individual way. Among these values would be at least a respect for the individual person, including care for personal freedom, responsibility, mutual trust and support; a respect for authority, freely accepted, based on mutual trust, and consistent with role and responsibility; and finally a commitment to the community, implying open communication and a sharing of benefits and burdens.<sup>5</sup>

While such a definition increases the complexity of membership for those within the boundaries of the group, it allows insiders to consider the common good as applying only to those who are included within the defined community. Although this definition describes a healthy community, it is incomplete. It leaves unanswered the question of why we are able to live within groups so self-righteously pitted against each other that the accumulated hatred of communities poisons us all. Or perhaps it clearly answers the question. I can be a faithful, contributing member of a benevolent community as described above and yet see no contradiction between my participating in the “religious community” and dismissing the rights of those outside the boundaries of my group because their definition of the “common good” does not match mine. The Alpine School District's decision to have prayer at graduation, despite the protests of those not part of the Mormon community, is one of the most recent of the “Because I can” lines of reasoning.<sup>6</sup>



There is an incredible tension within any given community between needing to show “respect for authority, freely accepted” as a community member, and avoiding “crimes of obedience.”

#### WHY NOT BOUNDARIES OF EXCLUSION?

*Most religions and spiritual groups have, at their core, a vital message that all human beings are connected to one another, affecting one another's fate and that of the world, and that people must find within themselves a moral compass for orienting both people and their environments.*<sup>7</sup>

—ROBERT ORNSTEIN AND PAUL ERLICH

*The commonwealth of God is grounded not in uniformity but mutuality. We are not replicates of one another, distinctive only to the extent that we have or have not*



received Jesus as our Lord and Savior, but related to one another in a single body with many different members, each with a unique gift. . . . Members in the commonwealth of God . . . are bound by the shared recognition that when one person suffers, all suffer; when we violate one life, all lives are violated; when we pollute the earth, all living things are stained; when one nation threatens the security of another, it too becomes less secure; when we place the planet in mortal danger, we hazard the future of our own children as well as the children of our enemies.<sup>8</sup>

—F. FORRESTER CHURCH

It is as impossible for Mankind not to unite upon itself as it is for the human intelligence not to go on indefinitely deepening its thought!<sup>9</sup>

—PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

Another consequence of the change in the meaning of work from private aggrandizement to public contribution would be to weaken the motive to keep the complexity of our society invisible. It would become part of the ethos of work to be aware of our intricate connectedness and interdependence. There would be no fear of social catastrophe or hope of inordinate reward motivating us to exaggerate our own independence.<sup>10</sup>

—ROBERT BELLAH, ET AL.

Anyone who believes that world peace won't be established until religious and cultural differences are obliterated . . . is thereby contributing to the problem rather than the solution. . . . The solution lies in the opposite direction: In learning how to appreciate—yea, celebrate—individual cultural and religious differences and how to live with reconciliation in a pluralistic world.<sup>11</sup>

—M. SCOTT PECK

But a spiritual connection with the earth is at the heart, really, of Mormonism. We Mormons have felt Enoch's bitterness of soul, we have heard him weeping for the earth's pains, we have heard the earth cry. "Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me?" What an astonishing, even revolutionary, passage of scripture that is! There's currently a scientific theory—the Gaia theory—that the earth is a complete and living organism. Most scientists scoff at that. But the concept of the earth as a living creation has been a part of Mormon philosophy from the first.<sup>12</sup>

—KRISTEN ROGERS

MY argument is clearly stated by these authors. We are interconnected. We do have a responsibility to a greater collective than one religious denomination or one sub-unit within that denomination, or even our own families, and human diversity is essential to our meeting those responsibilities.

Can a community be bounded *and* bonded to a larger unit than its own members? Can we hope for something more than "brothers and sisters killing one another with words or weapons, renting the one fabric, riving the body of God"?<sup>13</sup> We must, or our only home will become a human-created Armageddon.

#### CAN BOUNDARIES BE INCLUSIVE?

WHAT will it require to create boundaries of inclusion? I believe we must expand the definition of community even further into the qualitative realm. What do I want from spiritual communities within which I function? I resonate to Scott Peck's voice when he says that a community is

a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to "rejoice together, mourn together," and to "delight in each other, make others' conditions our own."<sup>14</sup>

There are some immediately apparent difficulties with achieving a community that has these characteristics. There is an upper limit of the number of intimate relationships (probably the 100-person limit that Ornstein and Erlich established). Few groups within any organization, religious or otherwise, have achieved that level of community. Not only that, such bonding characteristics *within* a group give no guarantee that the group will connect effectively with other groups.

Peck's reports of his work with community building, and our own infrequent experiences in communities, should help us to learn how to better create small communities. Think for a moment of your own experiences within any organization, such as your Mormon ward. In those rare instances where the kind of safety described above occurred, it likely was created in smaller groups, who then *included others* within their boundaries. I am hopeful that by creating enough safety in smaller groups we feel less threatened in searching for commonalities and diversities with other groups. Without that hope I face personal despair.

A religious community needs to strengthen individuals within the community while at the same time not judging persons different from them as unworthy; then while maintaining at the same time its identity, it needs to join with other diverse groups to accomplish goals important to all. The challenge of an organization, then, is to build a strong community through celebrating diversity *within* the community boundaries and then to take that strength *across* boundaries to create collective action.

#### CELEBRATING DIVERSITY WITHIN BOUNDARIES

WHAT kind of community building makes that dream possible? The difficulty of managing diversity *within* boundaries is demonstrated by the February 1990 SUNSTONE. At the



same time that Sunstone was sponsoring a conference on "Zion," the juxtaposition of two articles hints as to why so many of the papers used non-qualitative definitions of community.

The first article, "Homosexuality, Mormon Doctrine, and Christianity: A Father's Perspective," is, in my judgment, an honest, loving, and thoughtful identification of issues that matter to many families in many different parts of the world, and to more Mormon families than anyone willingly admits. This disclaimer was placed by SUNSTONE editors at the front of that article:

The following essay shares the painful journey of an LDS father who struggles with the theological implications of his son's homosexuality and subsequent death from AIDS. While most of our readers do not agree with his revised theology, all can empathize with his struggle. We present this essay only to enhance understanding of a growing challenge for the Church.<sup>15</sup>

In the same issue an article by Orson Scott Card, titled (offensively, to me) "The Hypocrites of Homosexuality," contains no such disclaimer. Is it assumed that most SUNSTONE readers agree with Card's labeling of homosexuals asking for consideration of the issues as hypocrites, fools, and sinners? I will not spend time on Card's arguments (which ignore the pain of the questioners), but I will suggest that I would have appreciated a disclaimer about the tone and arrogance of that article, best represented by these final words:

And if it happens that they never repent, then in the day of their grief they cannot blame us for helping them deceive and destroy themselves. That is how we keep ourselves unspotted by the blood of this generation, even as we labor to help our brothers and sisters free themselves from the tyranny of sin.<sup>16</sup>

So a tone of the SUNSTONE community is implied: questions born in pain are not in the belief system of most of the community; answers born in an assumption of a right of judgment are. Lines are drawn for "acceptable dissent." And, as psychologist Daniel Goleman says, "acceptable dissent," of course, is not really dissent at all. It is guided by shared schemas and challenges not shared illusions."<sup>17</sup> The danger of not challenging shared schemas will be addressed later.

Was excluding serious consideration of different views intended by SUNSTONE, supposedly one of the bastions of di-

verse thought? Because the effect was also the same for many other readers, whether intended or not, this represents a good example of how difficult it can be to value diversity within the boundaries of a community.

Consider the difference in tone when Unitarian minister F. Forrester Church argues, as Card is trying to, that tolerance cannot always be the highest value:

Today our very survival depends upon the establishment of a new norm by which to judge all such values, or virtues. That norm is the commonweal. Most

fundamentalists would define this norm according to their own narrow strictures and, imposing it, inflict their own values on everyone. In an age of interdependence this is heresy. But to avoid this heresy, we mustn't abandon the quest for communitarian values and cooperative virtue, even if it leads to a vigorous intolerance of groups or individuals who, in the name of freedom, truth, or God, place the common good in jeopardy.<sup>18</sup>

How does one build the kind of community Peck talks about when the requirements for membership focus primarily on what the community is not (Card) rather than what it is (Church)? Positive affirmation of what we are allows finding common ground with others; negative statements of what we are not leads to the exclusionary Pentecostal "community" Cohen described.

A second major dilemma in managing diversity within the boundaries of a religious group is the ever-present wish of humans to be blameless by remaining powerless.<sup>19</sup> To remain powerless means to give up decision making and responsibility to an authority figure. There is an incredible tension within any given community between needing to show "respect for authority, freely accepted" as a community member, and avoiding participation in what sociologists Herbert Kelman and Lee Hamilton call "crimes of obedience."<sup>20</sup>

That tension becomes even greater when a personal wish to be powerless goes with a person in his or her activities outside the community boundaries. For example, how does an LDS soldier in Vietnam resolve the life-long teaching to be obedient to authorities with the command by an authority to kill women and children? What do Mormon citizens do when their own convictions on a political issue are different from their local (or general) Church authorities, but are more similar to the local



Community can only be a safe place when differences are seen as valuable rather than abnormal.



Unitarians? These tensions within the community make it more difficult to know how to be inclusive with other communities.

#### CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF COMMUNITY

**M.** SCOTT PECK has identified some critical elements of building community.<sup>21</sup> I will apply his points in my way to the communities we work with, and add my own criteria. In order for community to have the possibility of occurring, at least the following conditions need to be present.

1. *Relative inclusivity rather than exclusivity.* While there are always some essential conditions of membership in order to have a bounded group, the temptation is to make those conditions more exclusive than necessary—sometimes as a way to establish the authority of a leader. We all can give examples of exclusivities imposed by particular leaders or cultures of specific organizations. I was in a ward where you could not have a temple recommend unless your seven-generation genealogical records were complete.

I attended and helped plan for the 1977 International Women's Year conference in Utah and saw 12,000 women with little or no knowledge of the issues being directed by men with walkie-talkies to vote or speak in particular ways. One of those LDS women, garment line clear beneath her blouse, turned to my research assistant, a convert to the Church who had proposed the "radical" suggestion that school curriculums be examined for balance, and spat out: "We don't want people like you here. Why don't you leave?" I was a stake Relief Society president at the time, yet Barbara Smith, general president of the Relief Society, told those 12,000 women I was not acceptable as a *Mormon* candidate for a delegate to the national convention. My sins? The reasons she gave to me: Being a Democrat, being part of the planning committee for the conference, and not being malleable enough.

Without answering the question of what core beliefs and behaviors are necessary for inclusion in a particular community, such destructive patterns of amending the boundaries will be endlessly repeated. Unfortunately, the question of core beliefs is seldom posed in positive terms in a chaotic world. Cohen indicates that exclusivity, a tightening of boundaries, "may not necessarily derive from any articulate and committed sense of the inherent character of a community; but rather from a felt need to *discriminate it from some other entity*. . . . In some cases, saliency attaches less to the substance of the supposed distinctiveness and *more to the need to display it*."<sup>22</sup> This tendency, of course, violates community as described by Peck: "Once a group has achieved community, the single most common thing members express is: 'I feel safe here.'"<sup>23</sup> I believe that the more a community feels the need to say what it is not rather than what it is, the more difficult it is to create inclusivity, and the more external criteria are used as judgments of the worth of a soul.

2. *Communities cannot tolerate authoritarianism.* According

to Peck, a decentralization of authority is essential for community, with the spirit of community being the real leader. Business leader Max DePree makes a lovely distinction between contractual and covenantal relationships/leadership<sup>24</sup> Contractual relationships deal with the quid pro quo, or the legalities, of working together. "Because I'm the bishop, that's why," is a contractual statement, and assumes both people agreed to the contract and the implied status differences. Covenantal relationships "rest on shared commitment to ideas, to issues, to values, to goals, and to management processes. Covenantal relationships are open to influence, . . . reflect unity and grace and poise."<sup>25</sup> Covenantal relationships are by nature cooperative, and move toward consensus. Covenantal leadership occurred when Danish royalty wore the yellow Star of David in response to Nazi orders that Jews wear the symbol.

The contrast is clearest in one hospital where I worked as a consultant. For thirty-five years contractual leadership had been dominant: People did what they were told, as quickly as they were told. The hospital was financially successful and employees relatively happy. Then a new administrator was appointed who wanted empowered employees who served the ill with love. To do that he needed covenantal leadership. When I interviewed seventy-two people there, from laundry workers to administrators, I asked each one what they would expect to have happen to them if they made a mistake that cost the hospital \$5,000. *Every one* replied that they would have to explain their reasoning, but if it was good they would be told to continue to do their job well. That workplace reflects "unity and grace and poise."

When covenantal relationships/leadership are in place, position has little importance. DePree's ideal of a roving leadership that responds to needs and competencies can come into play. In contrast, contractual leadership becomes stuck in issues of gender, race, education, and all of the other reasons used for not contracting for the skills of one group or another. I believe that the fatal flaw in the United Order as attempted by the early Church was that they were *trying for a community based on covenants*; as soon as the determination of "worthiness" and what people could receive was put in the hands of one person, the covenants were violated by a contract. Contracts can work for leading a community that is only bounded, in the social science sense of the term. Remaining at the contractual level will not work for the community of caring or bondedness I am describing as essential. That requires seeing leadership as a "condition of indebtedness,"<sup>26</sup> rather than status and power.

3. *Realism, which demands alternative views openly expressed.* Community must be able to hear the real experiences of those within its boundaries. Recently a friend told of attending Al Anon, which she does each week because her son is in a court-ordered Alcoholics Anonymous program. Sitting next to a woman she knows, she said, "Do you realize the last time we sat next to each other was in Relief Society?" Unsmilingly, her friend replied, "Yes, but *this is real*."

Differences in emotional intensity and style are important



realities in religious communities. I spend considerable time working with profit and non-profit organizations that are coming to realize the danger to their survival of not seeking out people who see problems differently, who search for different solutions, and who fight for their own views with integrity. Can a religious community “risk” looking carefully at the diversities needed within their group in order to keep their shared schemas from becoming dangerous? More commonly, a “group may implicitly demand of its members that they sacrifice the truth to preserve an illusion. Thus the stranger stands as a potential threat to the members of a group, even though he may threaten them only with the truth. For if that truth is of the sort that undermines shared illusions, then to speak it is to betray the group.”<sup>27</sup>

Kelman’s and Hamilton’s research shows the necessity of reducing the likelihood that people are inappropriately influenced by authority. They also suggest that to ensure that people see “reality” requires regular access to multiple perspectives whose credibility is not attacked.<sup>28</sup> Decision-making processes can be made less susceptible to the dangers of groupthink by assigning members to roles that require them to take an independent perspective, by including a “devil’s advocate” in each group (unfortunately that is usually the serious label given to a *different view!*), and by including all those affected by a decision in the process.

Additionally, the boundaries of decision-making or study groups need to be broadened and diffused. The same group making decisions all the time can come to see themselves as the only reality, with all others deviant from their norm. Being a “good member of the community” needs to be defined as someone who brings up issues that need to be considered, someone who knows that “dissent [is] not merely a right of citizens . . . but . . . an obligation.”<sup>29</sup>

Each member of a community also has responsibilities to a larger community, the collective good. To move in that larger community with no willingness to learn or to consider the views of others not part of one’s sub-group creates the evil of “militant ignorance.”<sup>30</sup> It also contributes nothing to the realism of the community, and thus nothing to the next element of community.

#### 4. Contemplation of the strengths and weaknesses of the commu-

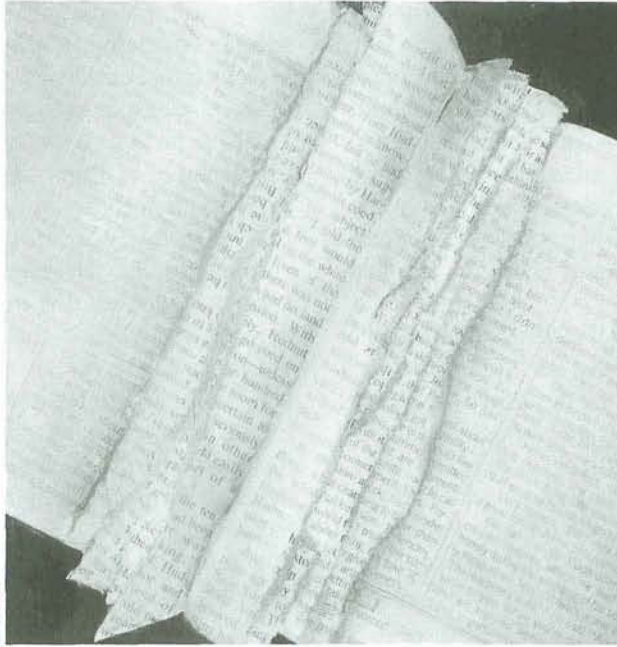
nity as well as of self. Whenever we are part of a community we have also become part of a frame or view of the world. “A frame is a shared definition of a situation that organizes and governs social events and our involvement in them. A frame is the public surface of collective schemas.”<sup>31</sup> That frame, though sometimes harmless, can be dangerous to the building of community.

The harm begins when the community is unable to see its strengths and weaknesses. Whenever I used an example of dysfunctional organizational behavior in my classes at BYU, I had at least one student say, “But that is not true of the Church organization.” Of course, it almost always is, and that is very uncomfortable for me and for the student, because he is following the two rules made explicit in the dysfunctional family literature: “There is nothing wrong with our family [organization]. And don’t tell anyone about it.”

Years ago when Relief Society had day and evening sessions, the evening group met at my home. We started out as seven working women. Within a few weeks my home was full, with thirty to forty women present. When asked why they came (many went to both sessions), one woman said, “Here people admit things like they feel like hitting their child sometimes. And people aren’t aghast—they listen, share, and we can talk.” They could consider themselves without judgment from others, and that allowed self-healing.

Without being able to allow that there are problems, to find the causes, and to admit our own share in them, there is no hope of moving toward the inclusivity and away from the authority-fixation that the previous two criteria mention. When “loyalty to the group requires that members not raise embarrassing questions, attack weak arguments, or counter softheaded thinking with hard facts,”<sup>32</sup> then the harder work of community discussed below becomes impossible.

5. *Safety and freedom to be who we are.* When this criterion is met, we are accepted and acceptable without the need from others to “heal” or “convert” our differences from them. We seek, in the words of organizational theorist Mary Follett, “unity, not uniformity.” A result of that freedom to be who you are is a sense of safety for those in the community, which is difficult in communities that focus more on what members are



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not than on what they are.

Sometime ago, in my role as assistant department chair at BYU, I attended a meeting of all the department heads in my college. The question of hiring a then visiting professor for a full-time position came up. She is extraordinarily competent, a superb teacher, and a fine scholar. However, the focus quickly centered on her family status. When it was explained that she was married, had five stepchildren and two of her own, one of the department chairs said, "Good, I'm all in favor. It is about time we had some normal role models around here." He had been my bishop when I had been Relief Society president. I had lived in his home for eighteen months, have been his colleague for twelve years, and had considered him a friend. That he had no idea of the impact of his words to the sense of safety for a single, childless woman who had always felt normal contributed even more to my sense of loss of community. Community can only be a safe place when differences are seen as valuable rather than abnormal: "Community is a safe place precisely because no one is attempting to heal or convert you, to fix you, to change you. Instead, the members accept you as you are."<sup>33</sup> From that acceptance comes the ability to use the diverse skills within the group.

6. *Conflict is allowed and resolved without the necessity of taking sides.* In a community no idea is too heretical, though some behaviors that truly affect community might be. The challenge for the community is to be clear about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. As in point 4 above, those criteria are often too constricting. Abraham Lincoln once said, "He has the right to criticize who has the heart to help." Dissent is not automatically behavior that is anti-community. Indeed, as discussed above, scholars suggest that dissent may be essential to a redefined role of a good citizen. Peck says that a community will have conflict, but it is a "place where conflict can be resolved without physical or emotional bloodshed and with wisdom as well as grace. A community is a group that can fight gracefully."<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, there are other characteristics of community that could be considered. These six points are, however, the foundation of community without which any other characteristics become ineffective.

#### WHAT MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO CROSS BOUNDARIES?

FROM a practical point of view, the hope of the planet is that we all come to define the human community as "a conglomerate of people who share common values and concerns so that they can become unified around particular issues. The central issue . . . is a common shared interest that unites people in coordinated action."<sup>35</sup> Surely the saving of the planet, the alleviating of suffering, and a recognition of our connectedness each to the other are interests as common as any interests can be. Surely religions ought to be leaders in seeking coordination toward that common interest; yet, without a focus on broader spiritual issues it appears unlikely that

this will happen.

There are factors that make it difficult to move effectively across community boundaries. Here are four of them.

1. *Organizations impose "hard" boundaries.* Peck describes his time at a Quaker school as one in which he learned much, in part because the boundaries between people were "soft"—it was easy to connect with others on the other side of the boundary. From my work on power, I have concluded that powerless people have hard boundaries: one of the symptoms of their powerlessness is that they fight to protect boundaries and to exclude other people from crossing them. Whatever small space they occupy is theirs alone.

In contrast, powerful people have boundaries that become ever more inclusive as they discover their need for the power of others to accomplish common goals. *To join in community is to understand that boundaries can create bonds rather than simply isolate.* Boundaries are not real, tangible—their reality "lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms."<sup>36</sup> This implies that we can maintain boundaries (in the sense of knowing who we are) while creating different meanings about their exclusivity. This is expanded by the points below.

2. *The fear of searching for commonalities and shared truths makes it difficult to cross boundaries.* Many religions consider themselves to be the only truth. Some take that so far as to reject any learning from other belief systems. A true spirit of community delights in the collective sharing of different truths, not the competition between truths. It is marked by a sense of peace and love with all humankind. To be able to be unfrightened by other truths requires integrity in one's sense of wholeness, allowing others to find their own wholeness in all its diversity. Community, crossing boundaries, requires understanding that "truth in religion is characterized by inclusivity and paradox. Falsity in religion can be detected by its one-sidedness and failure to integrate the whole."<sup>37</sup> To find commonalities among smaller communities requires looking for wholeness and integrity, even if different from one's own.

3. *Organizations get trapped by a language of status and displacement of responsibility.* To be able to create connections among diverse groups requires attention to many aspects of our lives that we take for granted. Sociolinguistics professor Deborah Tannen points out that there are two different language expressions of the world. In one, the world is a place where the individual is in a hierarchical social order in which one is either one-up or one-down. Conversation is "negotiation in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from others' attempts to put them down and push them around. Life is a contest, a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure."<sup>38</sup>

The other view of the world is one where individuals are part of a network of connection. "Conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus. They try to



protect themselves from others' attempts to push them away. Life is a community, a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation. Though there are hierarchies, they are hierarchies more of friendship than of power and accomplishment."<sup>39</sup>

These language patterns are conditioned early, and their impact on organizational closeness is far-reaching. In a status view, the person who challenges authority endangers the community. In the connected view, the person who isolates him or herself and others and makes it difficult to find commonalities endangers the community. In the SUNSTONE example above, Scott Card's article would have the disclaimer for the community group (in Tannen's usage), and Schow's would have the disclaimer for the status group (as it did). This explains, in part, different reactions to the two articles. I wanted the disclaimer for Card because his language worked against connection; yet the disclaimer was placed on the Schow article when its language was that of connection.

"The essential element of connection is symmetry: People are the same, feeling equally close to each other. The essential element of status is asymmetry: People are not the same: they are differently placed in a hierarchy."<sup>40</sup> Consider point 2 above: If my hierarchy is one of "truths," then my language in seeking connection will be the language of asymmetry, and that asymmetry makes connection extraordinarily difficult. And if all decisions are made in communities by those who focus on asymmetries, then the work of building community within and without becomes correspondingly more difficult. The temptation, as Peck points out, is to escape into organization and deference to authority in order to avoid the hard work of building community through finding symmetries.

#### WHAT HOPE IS THERE FOR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY?

FOR most of us, much of our life experience, much of what we hear on the news each day, much of our day-to-day experience models "contempt for the weak and obedience toward those wielding power."<sup>41</sup> To begin to move from the dulling impact of the world around us to a desire for and a willingness to commit to a spiritual community that nurtures us, those around us, and the earth requires paying attention. Psychologist Ellen Langer calls this dullness "mindlessness,"

and shows how it is caused by entrapment by category, automatic behavior, and acting from a single perspective.<sup>42</sup> Such mindlessness narrows our world in myriad ways: self-image, loss of control, unintended cruelties, learned helplessness, and stunted potentials.

Those consequences apply to communities that have trapped themselves in too narrow a world, with boundaries that are too rigid. As for individuals, the first step toward developing the critical characteristics of community is "mindfulness." We become more mindful to the extent that we can

create new categories, be open to new information, and be aware of different perspectives.<sup>43</sup>

For the mindful person, oppositional categories are at best incomplete, at worst prejudiced. Langer notes that

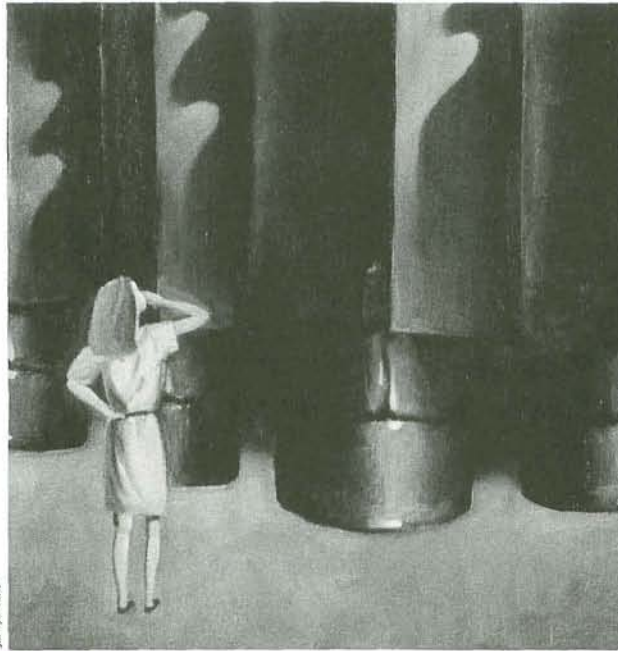
an understanding of the nature of mindfulness suggests a different approach to combatting prejudice—one in which we learn to make more, rather than fewer, distinctions among people. If we keep in mind the importance of context and the existence of multiple perspectives, we see that the perception of skills and handicaps changes constantly, depending on the situation and the vantage point of the observer.<sup>44</sup>

Such a view of many categories and perceptions makes it difficult to blithely label anyone a hypocrite, or any individual as unimportant to the community we are trying to build.

In like manner, for the mindful individual and the genuine community, new information is welcomed rather than feared, and multiple perspectives about that information and other issues are essential for keeping boundaries "soft" and empowering. When we cling to our own views, "we may be blind to our impact on others; if we are too vulnerable to other people's definition of our behavior we may feel undermined."<sup>45</sup> In my language: We need to be bounded, and we need to be bonded. When we are, we have choices about responses, we are able to change when we desire, and we are able to seek out those common interests that allow us to join with others without being afraid of losing our uniqueness.

#### CONCLUSION

I HAVE argued that the experience of community as a safe



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and nourishing place for individual growth is essential for individuals in groups to connect with other like groups in achieving the community of spirit that I judge as critical for our survival and our becoming fully human.

I have also argued that traditional religious practices can make it very difficult for the sense of safety to exist that allows religious groups to connect with others. To become mindful of those practices and their consequences is the first step toward allowing our own communities to become more diverse and nurturing.

Is religious community an oxymoron? If having exclusive boundaries of membership is a sufficient condition for community, then my answer is yes. If religion leads us to understand the underlying connectedness of us all to each other and to the Earth, then religious community can become a critical first step toward spiritual community. ☐

### NOTES

1. Rachel Naomi Remen, quoted by Joan Borysenko in *Guilt is the Teacher, Love is the Lesson* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1990), 18.
2. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 333.
3. Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 60-63.
4. Robert Ornstein and Paul Erlich, *New World, New Mind* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1989), 62.
5. Peter L. Danner, "The Moral Foundations of Community," *Review of Social Economy* 42 (December 1984): 231.
6. I would not presume to disagree with Dallin Oaks's legal reasoning about prayer in the schools (see *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 1990). However, his subsequent sending of a letter to the chair of the board of the ACLU about the executive director of the organization (*Salt Lake Tribune*, 4 July 1990) shows that he did not understand the points she raised, whatever her style: When you are the majority you need to show special concern for the rights of the minority if you care about building a bigger community. Alpine School District did not show for the eighteen years I lived in the district concern for those who are not conservative Mormons. Children of friends have been ridiculed for not folding their hands to pray in the Primary way (obviously revealed as an eternal truth), high school students have been punished by teachers for challenging the religious norms such as taking seminary, and teachers carefully watched their colleagues who dared to teach evolution. The most overt violation of minority rights happened in the spring of 1987 when an Orem high school A Capella Choir tour of the East included an orientation in class time of how to place copies of the Book of Mormon. The major tour activities were concerts in Mormon chapels singing Mormon hymns. When a student (who happened to be LDS) objected to mixing the Mormon church into a public school setting, she became the first person in twenty-five years who was not allowed to rejoin the choir after a year of participation. The reason given was that she was a "difficult personality." School prayer is the precipitating issue; the punishing of the minority by the majority is the real community issue. In the words of a letter to the editor: "What these LDS spokesmen fail to understand is the high feeling of anger and resentment among non-Mormons when secular institutions for all Utahns are used by Mormons for their own benefit without regard to the feelings, beliefs, or ideas on prayer of the remainder of Utah society" (*Salt Lake Tribune*, 18 July 1990).
7. Ornstein and Erlich, 145.
8. F. Forrester Church, *The Seven Deadly Virtues* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 94-95.
9. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (San Francisco: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 133.
10. Bellah, et al., 289.
11. M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 19-20.
12. Kristen Rogers, "Stewards of the Earth," *This People* (Spring 1990): 13.
13. Church, 94.

14. Peck, *Drum*, 59.
15. H. Wayne Schow, "Homosexuality, Mormon Doctrine, and Christianity: A Father's Perspective," *SUNSTONE* 14 (February 1990): 9, emphasis added.
16. Orson Scott Card, "The Hypocrites of Homosexuality," *SUNSTONE* 14 (February 1990): 45.
17. Daniel Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self Deception* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 248.
18. Church, 97.
19. Peter Block, *The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987).
20. Herbert C. Kelman and V. Lee Hamilton, *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
21. Peck, *Drum*, 61ff.
22. Cohen, 109-10, emphasis added.
23. Peck, *Drum*, 67.
24. Max DePree, *Leadership is an Art* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 50-51.
25. DePree, 51.
26. DePree, 59.
27. Goleman, 240.
28. Kelman and Hamilton, 328ff.
29. Kelman and Hamilton, 330.
30. M. Scott Peck, "Further along the Road Less Traveled: Growing Up Painfully," Simon & Schuster audio presentation, 1990.
31. Goleman, 197.
32. Goleman, 183.
33. Peck, *Drum*, 68.
34. Peck, *Drum*, 71.
35. Helen K. Grace, "Building Community: A Conceptual Perspective," *International Journal of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation* (Spring/Summer 1990): 21.
36. Cohen, 98.
37. Peck, *Drum*, 240.
38. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 24-25.
39. Tannen, 24-25.
40. Tannen, 28.
41. Alice Miller, *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 99.
42. Ellen J. Langer, *Mindfulness* (Menlo Park: Addison-Wesley, 1989), 10.
43. Langer, 62.
44. Langer, 154.
45. Langer, 69.



## NO UNCLEAR THING

I want the corpses staring up, ragged  
wings circling overhead. Pluck out the sky.

The ropes that bind our hands dissolve  
into history.

We are the dust we breathe,  
longing to rest wherever the white-gloved  
finger of God will not erase.

What if  
the earth is our final estate, our flesh  
some thread-bare glory we hang on a hook?  
White-aproned God, flies gather on the meat  
as horses drag our bodies by the heels.

—TIMOTHY LIU