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Defining Community in the Age of Globalization

I do look forward to our time together in January, to this conversation and meeting people with such diverse experiences. As a community builder at Tamarack and as a volunteer in the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at Conrad Grebel University College I have found the papers we have read to prepare for our gathering inspiring – oddly enjoyable and hopeful. As a father, I am deeply grateful that there are people in this world who care about such topics.

I bring my story and the experience of Vibrant Communities to this discussion in the hope that the community building lens and the peace building lens can co-exist. They are sisters of the same family that come from a similar value and experience. Communities often face conflict from “outside” in which larger political and environmental conditions affect them adversely. In this way many issues of conflict faced by communities are beyond their control.

My experience, though, shows me that communities are most often the hope for “fixing”, repairing and or mitigating the damage of the conflict. In place, people are able to bind together through trust and mutual know-how. They can stand together and navigate through the storm, collectively healing both spirit and place. They are a micro system that, depending on their strength and ability, can be prepared to respond in times of uncertainty. For me it is in place, in community, that the true hope for a peaceful and just world reside.

To drink and be nourished

In reading Aaron Wolf’s paper, *The Enlightenment Rift and Peacebuilding: Rationality, Spirituality and Shared Waters*, I was fascinated by the use of water as both a concrete tangible resource to negotiate over but also as a metaphor for describing and agreeing on what sustains life. There seemed to be a tension in the paper between the physical and the spiritual. Between need and hope, human instinct and

human need, drinking and being nourished. I think Aaron did a wonderful job playing that tension through his paper and left me needing to read it again and again to try and find the links and differences.

I kept thinking of a children's story, one we often use in community building circles, as I read this paper. It is the story of Stone Soup. The story goes like this:

A traveller without food came across a village. As he met one villager after another he asked if any had some food they might share with him that evening. Person after person commented on the poor weather, the bad harvest... "My meagre supplies won't do you much good," each said walking away downhearted.

The traveller settled himself in the village square and built a small fire. He took a soup pot from his bag, filled it with water from the village well and put it on to boil. Then, with some villagers looking on, he gathered some stones, dropping them one at a time into the pot.

"What are you doing?" they asked.

"Making stone soup," he replied.

"Stone soup," they laughed. "You can't make soup out of stones."

"Indeed you can," responded the traveller. "And it's delicious. Stay with me and we will share it when it's ready."

So the small group sat and waited and talked while the water boiled. Eventually, the traveller recalled another time that he enjoyed stone soup with some friends. One of his companions happened to have some carrots that they added to the pot. Oh, how it sweetened the broth!

"I have a few carrots," remembered one of the villagers. "Let me get them and add them in."

And so he did and the group settled again and talked some more, until the traveller began dreaming aloud about other stone soups he had heard of in his travels. “Some people put potatoes in their stone soup, others season their stone soup with thyme...” Soon others in the circle also began recalling their favourite soups, and as they did, the few items they had in their cupboards at home came to mind. One after another they went off and returned with a turnip or a tomato or some parsley to add to the soup. Some brought back their friends and family who had grown curious about the gathering they could see in the square and the sweet aroma that was now blowing in the breeze. In time, these newcomers joined in the dreaming and added their own favourite ingredients into the mix.

By evening’s end, the traveller’s pot was overflowing. Everyone ate well and all agreed that the stone soup they shared that night was the most remarkable soup they had ever tasted [World Neighbours 2000].

The resource to be negotiated in this story is food. On a physical level, it is the same as water – that which sustains life. As a spiritual metaphor it is also similar – that which gives life. The story in this way is about a hungry traveler in need of both physical food and companionship (community). The people of the village are not willing to share either food or companionship. In other versions of this story the teller often makes the towns people scared and suspicious of the traveler.

The traveler in this story is much more than a trickster that causes community members to give of their food. The traveler is a peace maker (builder) and a community developer extraordinaire. Yes, he was hungry for food to fill his belly but he also wanted companionship, community. So he creates a forum for conversation and agreement. Soon enough the entire village is enjoying a wonderful meal and a deep sense of community and communal experience.

This story I have no doubt actually happened - somewhere. It has now been told over and over by many people in many cultures and is used as a teaching tool. This story provides at least two important lessons. The first is the power of community unity during difficult times. It asks the listener to look beyond their own need for food and teaches the power of sharing. If we share then we can all live. Much the same as when we negotiate over water. Secondly, the story gives us a technique for unity. Each of us can take the place of stranger, the trickster to help our community to see their true wealth. We all have

the skills to bring a community into conversation, to share a little and to break down suspicion, fear and need.

I would like to bring this story to our conversation in January.

Collaboration in Chaotic Times:

What causes people to want to collaborate? To share of the resources they have - especially in uncertain times? Our world is entering a dangerous time. Global warming, economic upheaval, pandemics and war are resulting in wide spread (physical and spiritual) drought and famine, natural and human disasters causing death, mass displacement and a culture of fear in communities around the world. The possibility for violence seems inevitable. In times like this if only there was more stone soup!

A question I am often asked is, “Can we prepare our communities to be more collaborative and in turn more resilient for the environmental uncertainty that is coming?” The optimist in me always wants to answer yes to this question though most often it is the realist in me that answers. I say well, “I know only one thing for certain, it depends.”

It depends on many factors and conditions that already exist in a community. Like growing a good garden, the key is good soil, quality seeds, a bit of gardening know-how and the fortitude to follow through.

Community collaboration would be easy if the conditions were always perfect and predictable. If we could control the weather our garden would always grow according to plan. So in times of environmental uncertainty we can only create the pre conditions for collaborative response.

Community collaboration is filled with many surprises and less than ideal conditions and so, as with gardening, forming a collaboration in our communities requires adaptability based on the conditions we are facing. And so I defend my well-honed response: it depends. Continuing to use the gardening metaphor, let's look at the role fertile soil plays in community collaboration.

In his article (<http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/129/savecollab.html>), *Can this Collaborative be Saved* (2003), Paul Mattessich outlines three points that we need to consider when starting a collaborative effort. The **first** is to consider whether there is a rich history of collaboration or cooperation in a community. If there is a strong history of collaboration people can more easily understand the power of working together and have the skills to join in. If there is little history of collaboration in a community more time will be needed to educate people, shaping expectations and developing buy in from potential partners, funders and others whose support is crucial to working together. In times of severe uncertainty, there is no such time.

There are numerous examples of communities that have a strong history of working together and during times of physical danger they bind together and respond. Similarly we can think of communities like New Orleans in which there was minimal formal or informal collaboration (learn more here <http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s86.html>).

Mattessich's **second** consideration is the reputation of the leadership group and each of its members. If we have people in our collective who are well known and trusted with a reputation for getting things done it will take far less time to develop trust and to achieve the kind of clout required to catch the attention of stakeholders.

In places where there is a strong and trusted government collaboration is much easier. Alternatively a strong voluntary or civil society can bring people together. The critical factor is that people at the community level are engaged and that they believe they are listened to and supported in their collaborative actions.

The **third** condition is an appropriate political and social climate for the things that need to be accomplished. If the issues are well known and commonly understood as important they are supported more easily. When there is confusion or multiple and conflicting agendas collaboration is always more difficult.

I would consider these three factors – a rich history of collaboration, a good reputation, and the appropriate political and social climate – critical when considering any collaborative effort. If a

community lacks any or all of these factors they can still continue their efforts but I caution: we must be realistic. This is the “it depends” factor in action.

Think of these factors as good soil. If you have all three, things will grow faster. If you do not have the three factors, you will need to take extra care and collaborative efforts will require extra supports.

I have used the gardening metaphor here mainly as it is useful in trying to answer the question: “Can we prepare our communities to more collaborative and in turn more resilient for the environmental uncertainty that is coming?”

Over the last 7 years we have helped communities to form large scale collaborations to address poverty in their communities. On the surface this is a large scale poverty reduction program. Our larger intention is to build the skills in communities for working together so that regardless of the need there are deep connections and bonds of trust across sectors, religion, race, age and gender and in doing so prepare communities for more difficult times ahead.

Communities engage in five “learning themes” together.

The first is to learn to identify the real issue and to come to a common understanding of this issue. In doing so they are able to name the issue across all sectors – truly making it a community idea.

Secondly, communities learn to work comprehensively. In this way they learn not to address a piece of the issue but rather try and address the whole issue at once. Poverty in this way is not about housing, money, health, justice and opportunity; rather, it is all of these. Communities recognize anyone of these factors alone does not end poverty but rather we must address all these factors to truly change things.

Third, people learn to identify the assets a community has and then bring the representatives of those assets into the conversation. Once we have gathered our assets together they then consider the nature of the issue through a lens of opportunity (leveraging our assets) rather than seeing the problem and fighting it.

Fourth, communities learn to work across sectors. They build leadership teams made up equally of business leaders, government leaders, voluntary sector leaders and those people most directly effected by the issue (in the case of poverty those that are poor). These leadership teams often spend more than a year inviting people from their sector into multisector conversations about the issue they are addressing. These community conversations are most often the powerful force that builds community will and momentum for change. Finally, the cycle of people talking, agreeing to work together and then doing whatever they agreed to do together repeats itself over and over again in a cycle of reflecting, planning and doing. People learn that true change is not through one idea or leader but rather through a cycle of learning and change.

What causes people to want to collaborate? Can we help people to work together for the common good? For the past seven years the Tamarack Institute, a charity I co-founded with business leader and philanthropist Alan Broadbent, has been dedicated to understanding this question. Our mandate is to help communities work better together and to make the work of working together easier and more effective. Easier so that we can replicate what we learn in many communities and more effective in that the work of working together has measurable outcomes. You can learn more at www.tamarackcommunity.ca .

In order to learn as much as we can as quickly as possible, we have launched a 10-year action learning project (Vibrant Communities Canada) and have so far engaged 13 cities to build city wide campaigns to reduce poverty. To date nearly 3,000 organizations are networked and 130,000 low income families have benefited from this initiative. You can learn more at www.vibrantcommunities.ca