

A QUERY REGARDING COMMUNITY  
FOR CHRISTIANS IN STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

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One late night at the office, a security guard poked his head in to ask what I was doing. I described this article and CACSD's conference theme: "Community and Diversity: Providing Inclusive Higher Education Environments." He responded, "That sounds high tech. It would be over my head."

Uwe Poerksen has detected a "small and spreading international vocabulary of ... words"<sup>1</sup>—"communication," "identity," "information," "resource," "development," "education," "process," "relationship"—which he calls "plastic" because of their flexibility, conforming to any context. Through a migration process, these words have changed in meaning. Originally they existed in the vernacular, but gradually science drew in these concepts "altered them, and then released them in their new form back into the common language, where they have had enormous effects."<sup>23</sup> While plasticity may seem convenient, it is actually unfortunate since, rather than describing or clarifying, plastic words bend and melt to fit any context while actually saying nothing. Is it any wonder the security guard thought our theme sounded technical and over his head?

Our challenge in handling these words is to say something specific. I propose a query<sup>4</sup> regarding the term "community": *If community is an empty vessel of a word, then how are we going to fill it in the context of student development?*<sup>5</sup>

The empty vessel image is instructive. Wendell Berry writes of a galvanized bucket that has hung on a fencepost on his grandfather's farm for at least fifty years: "what is going on in that bucket is the most momentous thing I know, the greatest miracle that I have ever heard of: it is making earth." This is a slow process "of growth and death, gravity and decay, which is the chief work of the world."<sup>6</sup> Berry finds the

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<sup>1</sup> Uwe Poerksen, *Plastic Words* (Penn State University Press, 1995) 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Lawrence Smith, *A Quaker Book of Wisdom* (Eagle Brook, 1998) 34-35. "Queries ... are [questions] designed to prick the conscience and prompt both group and individual self-examination. ... they invariably focus on helping [people] conduct their spiritual and temporal lives in accordance with their religious beliefs. Specific queries may be revisited from time to time within a ... community, evoking quite different responses."

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to David Shepherd for this question. When we gather with our CACSD conference community in May, we may want to revisit this query, substituting other words such as "development" and "inclusive environments." We can certainly expect varied responses!

<sup>6</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Work of Local Culture" in *What are People For?* (North Point Press, 1990) 153.

bucket “irresistibly metaphorical. It is doing in a passive way what a human community must do actively and thoughtfully. . . . collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. . . . build soil, and build memory of itself—in lore and story and song—that will be its culture.”<sup>7</sup>

This is the process into which we must invite our students—the slow process of making community and local culture. More than a label, community is a shared endeavour. If the word itself is an empty vessel, then each of our particular communities is a like the bucket: the soil quality depends on what goes into it. For rich soil, an educational community needs to intermingle at least five elements: place, time, shared activity, story, and commitment.

First, we add place. We invite our students to join us in specific places, with particular colours, shapes, sizes, geography, and architecture. Often students who come to Briercrest lament leaving mountains, coastlines and cities for 8 months of flat, colourless prairie existence. Yet, when cumulus clouds fill the sky, when the Northern Lights dance and dazzle, when stars seem to be brighter and more numerous than anywhere else, many come to appreciate Saskatchewan’s slogan, “the land of the living skies”. Our students gather in dorms, cafeteria, coffee shops, classes, library, hallways, and in Hildebrand Chapel, with its memorable colours. Place and time come together in the Hildebrand Chapel as students gather to worship.

Chapel is the space where we as a community of believers gather together to seek glimpses of the divine and discover what it means to worship as we discover what it means to be loved. It is a time of receiving both truth and love through thought and feeling. It is a place of healing, celebration, lament and thanksgiving. It is essential because it is a time when we remember what we have forgotten or lost and in doing so find ourselves re-membered as individual bodies, as a communal body, and as the body of our risen Lord.<sup>8</sup>

Let us put “time” in our bucket. Being “re-membered” is a compelling vision for all Christians, not just for Briercrest, and is realized not only in meeting times but over extended and indefinite time—a lifetime. We must remain “confident [like Paul], that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Php. 1:6). Education equips for the future, but must also attend to the present. When Wendell Berry’s fictional character Jayber Crow was plagued by many questions, he sought answers from a respected professor who advised, “You have been given questions to which you

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 154. Berry’s ideas are tied closely to rural and agricultural economy, which, he argues, are crucial for the health of the country, not just locale. I agree with him on the revitalization of rural communities, but to expound on the need for and implications of this is beyond the scope of this paper and, I believe, beyond the place where we start with most of our students.

<sup>8</sup> Brita Miko, chapel purpose statement, Briercrest Bible College, June 2000.

cannot be *given* answers. You will have to live them out—perhaps a little at a time.” Jayber wonders how long that might be and the professor replies, “I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps.” Then he adds, “I will tell you a further mystery . . . It may take longer.”<sup>9</sup> We need patient attention to the present moment, to live out our questions and to help our students do the same with theirs. A few months or years of education are often only a beginning.

How shall we spend our time? By adding shared activity to our bucket. Being rural is one advantage at Briercreech, allowing many of us to know each other by name. Our location necessitates doing things together, though access to videos, Internet, cars and spending money have been changing this. Increased choice requires increased intentionality about truly communal activities, as simple as preparing and eating food together. Students sometimes complain of boredom or of being in a bubble, saying they “need to get away.” Decades before the current restlessness, G. K. Chesterton wrote,

It is not fashionable to say much nowadays of the advantages of the small community. We are told that we must go in for large empires and large ideas. There is one advantage, however . . . The man who lives in a small community lives in a much larger world. He knows much more of the fierce varieties and uncompromising divergences of men. . . . In a large community we can choose our companions. In a small community our companions are chosen for us.<sup>10</sup>

Too much affinity-based grouping, then, is harmful to community. The challenge is to spend time and energy with the neighbours we're given, not just those we prefer.

Doing things together is important for living with dissimilar neighbours. During shared activity, stories fall into the bucket, enriching our community soil, developing shared memory. As Christians our common story is the gospel, yet each has their own testimony. As we tell our own stories we begin to see how diverse yet interconnected our Christian community is. We must listen to and live with one another. It is one thing to know facts, for example, that my neighbour is Ojibwe and likes bannock; it is another to call her by name, visit her family, eat her bannock, talk with her. My Ojibwe friend's people value listening and, with “the talking stick,” ensure time for speakers to be heard. We must teach our students to listen, “because [others] are human beings made in the image of God who have things to tell us that we need to know and will be better for hearing. And at the same time listening to their stories will help us form relationships with them.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Counterpoint Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Brave New Family* (Ignatius Press, 1990) 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, community requires commitment. We must urge our students to stay put, to keep promises, to resist transience and fragmented relational networks. Jayber Crow, who spends several years lost and a few moving further away, is suddenly seized by a homing instinct. But homecoming is not the end; Jayber learns to belong and to say, “I will have to share the fate of this place. Whatever happens to Port William must happen to me.”<sup>12</sup> We must call students to learn this, too; tension and conflict can be productive catalysts, not signals to leave. We must help them to choose stability, which is transformative. Since beginning my work in higher education in 1994, I have been astounded by the transformation possible in the student who commits with his or her whole being to stay. This commitment goes with them beyond school.

Ironically, with all this talk of filling a bucket, it is self-emptying that contributes to community, just as death and decay contribute to making soil. Henri Nouwen calls this “a ‘kenotic’ self-encounter,” in which we “face our fundamental human condition and fully experience it as the foundation of all learning . . . the experience that teacher and student are both sharing the same reality . . . both naked, powerless, destined to die, and, in the final analysis, totally alone and unable to save each other or anyone else.”<sup>13</sup> Humbling or horrifying as this can be, it is a source of strength, mirroring the *kenosis*, or self-emptying, of Christ (Php. 1:1-6). Having an attitude the same as Christ Jesus means we turn toward the other with concern for them and interest in what they are doing. This is the source of encouragement, comfort, fellowship and love. This leads to union with Christ and our spiritual family in true community.

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<sup>12</sup> Berry, *Jayber Crow*.

<sup>13</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (Image Books, 1978) 19.