

Text for Talk given at Southeastern Regional AEE  
conference  
March 15, 2008  
Camp Greenville, SC

Working Title: No Separation: The Individual and the  
Community and the World

Thanks to Ed for introduction

Old New Yorker cartoon: “I know so much I don’t know  
where to begin.”

We all know a lot: in the information age, maybe too  
much, or at least too much information coming at us to sort  
and process effectively – sort of like drinking from a fire  
hose. For months prior to this talk I’ve been wrestling with  
the question of what is most important to work on in  
building community, walking around talking to myself like  
a person with Tourette’s syndrome. Nowadays, since  
everyone else is doing the same thing on their BlueTooth  
earpieces, no one notices or looks too alarmed. But the  
question has intrigued me: **What IS the most important  
thing to consider in the process of building community?**

The oxymoron of the situation: giving a lecture to those  
who learn best by experience.

\* I can only offer that this, in a lopsided way is a  
sharing of experiences: the question of community is so  
complex that I’ve been wrestling with how to present it  
since Ed asked me four months ago, and decided that the  
last thing I want to present is a declaration on “how to do

community” when I am struggling daily with exactly that process

Show of Hands for: (jot down the bulk of the hands by the decades, and also do the same for the

- Age Ranges: 20’s; 30’s, 40’s, 50’s, 60’s, 70’s, 80’s and beyond
- Nature of where they work:
  - \* Private camps
  - \* Religiously affiliated camps
  - \* Adjudicated youth
  - \* Therapeutic Recreation
  - \* For profit Recreational companies
  - \* Non profit institutions
  - \* Education; public?
    - Independent?
    - Colleges?
  - \* Other obvious genres I might have missed?

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My own experience with the following types of communities;

- Family owned and dynastic summer camp; one of the oldest, and something of a seed crystal for many of the other camps in the area
- An intentional community that was a utopian vision grafted onto a commercial enterprise: The NOC

- A non profit, NC Outward Bound, one of the Godfather institutions of Experiential Education
- An independent school in Colorado
- Now, 16 years in Asheville City Public Schools

So, I realize, with a bit of a shock, that I have been involved in experiential and academic – educational in some form or the other - communities for almost 40 years, since my first summer at Mondamin in 1969. What do I know? Well, a little more each day, but I forget the obvious daily and have to relearn it: an example:

At this same regional conference of the AEE in 1992, at the NOC, where I was the head of the instruction department, I was asked to give an address such as this one. I was in the process of leaving NOC after 17 years to enter public education as a teacher in Asheville, and I was asked to discuss the “Fusion of intellectual Discovery and Physical Adventure.” Wow! Great topic! So I thought about it for months, and then got up at three in the morning the day I was to give the talk to write it down.

This year, Ed Maggert asked me to give this talk on community, and I thought:

“Wow! Great Topic!” And I thought about it for months, and then got up this morning at four thirty to write it down. So as you can see, all I’ve learned in the past 16 years is how to get an hour and a half more sleep before a deadline is due.....

Now, to tie that presentation to this one, because there is a connection. I pulled out my old handwritten notes from the 1992 conference. A few years after that conference, incidentally, Earl, one of the organizers saw me and

congratulated me on the talk I gave. I thanked him and asked him what he remembered about it, and he said:

“Well, nothing, really, but I remember that I liked it....”

So maybe I could just have saved some time and used the same notes. But to make the connection between that talk and this, let me summarize the main point from it:

I made the argument that all learning, all education, rests on two things:

- \* The establishment of patterns, and
- \* The breaking of patterns, what the great American philosopher William James called a “pattern interrupt.”

I contended at the time, and still believe, that conventional classroom education spends most of its energy on the former and experiential education provides the latter.

( At this point, ask the audience to give examples of each, to see if they can make the concept their own). Patterns vs. Aha moments; Cultural Literacy vs the zip line or the leap for the trapeze at the top of a ropes course.

Now I still believe in this basic description of what underlies all learning and all education: I might have been taking a risk to say it back in 1992, but I put it out there as a hypothesis and have been testing it in the laboratory of public school (as in **lab**, not in the bathroom....) ever since then. My contention remains that both principles are essential, not in opposition, though there is often what I would call a creative tension between them, and for the health of a community, one that should be constantly reviewed and revised.

So, now, fast forward to 2008 and a talk about Community Building and how do those underlying principles fit? I think you can see where I'm going:

The **Establishment of Patterns**: This is what anthropologists study ceaselessly, and it is ceaselessly fascinating – how do communities develop and transmit values, ethics, and applicable survival skills for their specific environment? For example, I am constantly struck when interacting with my Jewish friends at the extraordinary dynamism and resilience of that culture, which has existed and reformed itself over thousands of years around core patterns of belief, behavior, and tradition. To attend a ceremony such as a Bar Mitzvah and see the transmission of that culture across the generations is an impressive example of the power of pattern establishment.

The **Breaking of Patterns**: What happens when environments change? When you get the big AHA moment that you need to do things differently, or rather have the opportunity to do so? When your world shifts and an opportunity for change is given or thrust upon you? Falling in love or out of it; a windfall or a huge financial setback; or, as is currently happening, a shifting of the world's natural environment so that all the things you took as permanent, like permafrost in the Arctic or sea level in Bangladesh, start changing? This is the test of community now, more than ever before – the accelerating rate of change that humanity is experiencing; greater than any species has experienced, including the great Cretaceous extinction event of 70 million years ago or so. Now we are

in what is called the Holocene, where species are becoming extinct at 100-1000 times the previous rates, as EO Wilson has described in the Diversity of Life.

It is an extraordinary time to be alive. As Al Gore described in An Inconvenient Truth, his documentary about global warming, the Chinese character is the same for the concepts of crisis and opportunity. I believe by temperament, the folks in the experiential education community are well suited to addressing these incredible challenges, not just in being part of our specie's adaption to the climate change it has accelerated, but also in shaping the communities that will emerge in the epochal shift from a petrochemical based economy in our lifetimes, certainly in the lifetimes of the younger members here.

You by your natures tend to be physically and intellectually active people, emotionally engaged, and socially aware. I believe that most of us want to be individual agents for positive change, and parts of communities that contribute to such positive changes or we would not be here at this conference (where, I might add, I was pleased to see a workshop on biofuels on the agenda). But it's very easy to get overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems that face us, even cowed and bludgeoned into a sort of resigned fatalism about them, especially since there is no "common enemy" against whom to rally, the way that those who are now known as "the Greatest Generation" rallied together in the Great Depression and World War II of the last century.

A great statesman of that war, Winston Churchill, made a perfect summation of the American character that I

think still stands today, and makes me laugh even as I wince at it's accuracy:

“Americans,” he said, “will always choose to do the right thing, once they have exhausted all other options.”

I thought of this the other day when I was down in Charlotte, NC for an educational conference. Describe the 8 lanes of I-85 thick with traffic, the right turn in Concord onto Speedway Ave, four lanes of traffic through miles of parking lots and shopping opportunities for more consumption; fast food complexes and oil change places; the giant convention center on the left, the four or five football field size parking lot filled with giant motor homes and RVs, and rising above it all, the two mile oval of the Lowe's motor speedway for Nascar races, rising like some giant Roman Coliseum to energy consumption, and just as evocative as an image of a decadent empire about to go over the edge. And remember, the values that are represented in all that are far more representatives of the majority of Americans today than those represented here at this conference. Let's compare NASCAR attendance to AEE conference attendance, shall we?

And in this cycle of consumption, don't let me allow experiential education or myself off the hook. Also in Charlotte is the recently opened US Whitewater Center, a modern coliseum of only slightly smaller energy consumption than the NASCAR speedway, a place where people practice the adventure sports that formerly took place in nature, on whitewater rivers and on cliffs. At USWWC, one of the largest consumers of electricity in Charlotte, 1200 cfs are lifted up 24 feet to create wonderful class III and IV rapids, and climbers climb on wonderful

climbing towers that look like the SixShooter peaks of Utah's Indian Creek Canyon area. It is a place, as my friend, John Lane, a poet and writer at Wofford College has said, "has the carbon footprint of Godzilla." Have I paddled and climbed there? You bet! It was fantastic. I've also driven my car all over America to go climbing and paddling, and I gratefully clip my petrochemical quickdraws into stainless steel bolts that I usually wish were closer together, and probably represent a full barrel of Saudi crude when I get into my plastic kayak with my drysuit and all other gear on.... There is no separation: we're all part of the problem.

My point here is not to bash the good people teaching and guiding at the USWWC; it was designed by a person I know and respect, and several of its staff are former NOC staff co-workers of mine. There is an argument to be made that its close proximity to an urban population will help further environmental awareness and appreciation of nature based adventure sports, and even that less gas will be burned as paddlers and climbers stay close to the city and don't take all those killer drives up to the mountains every weekend. I don't fully buy that argument, but it has its points, including one that we will increase the diversity of participants in our wilderness sports by getting minority participants from the urban areas more engaged. It could happen.

But I didn't come here tonight to cause everyone to slide into a bleak depression or feel guilty about the fact that we drove here in separate cars, many of us. The same Churchill quote could be applied to the first of the big oil shocks in the early 1970's: all the experts said that

Americans would NEVER change their driving and oil consumption habits, but we did in less than six months. We simply forgot about it once the perception of crisis lessened, and we then went back to our consumptive ways and even accelerated them. I believe that in small communities all across America we can renew that practical approach to energy problems: after all, wind power was the primary source for agriculture on the Great Plains before the era of Big Oil came in. It can be again.

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Y basta! Enough! Okay, Okay, Gordon, we get it! You think the world is going to hell in a handbasket. What does this have to do with community? Only this: what a fantastic time to be alive when we can gather so much information about our actions and make decisions based on that information with so much greater accuracy and speed than ever before in our species history. As our impact has grown, so has our awareness, and I believe that the very decentralized nature of information via the internet and other mechanisms we can't even imagine yet gives us the opportunity to build communities locally while we are informed globally, to give meaning to that perhaps overused phrase. I believe that this information network, which is starting to approach organic levels of diversity and complexity, allows the free flow of information so that we can actually make real the metaphor envisioned by WH Auden in a poem written at the onset of WW II:

...under the night,  
our world in stupor lies,

Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out, wherever the Just  
    Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleagured by the same  
Negation and despair,  
    Show an affirming flame.

**But we first need to look clearly at ourselves, and address one of my central points of community building:**

**1.The breaking of patterns:** I believe that the basis of successful community building begins with the individual breaking down the myth of separation of self and community, of self and the world. **This means the elimination of one of the strongest patterns of all: the dualistic way of looking at issues and problems and people as something other than yourself.** IN order to address the problems of your community and, by expansion, the world itself.

By this I mean something that I have long observed in communities: the fact that as soon as we are engaged in one, we become aware that there are other people present who drive us crazy because **THEY DON'T THINK LIKE WE DO.** I have seen this time and again in every community of which I have been a part, including the current small alternative school of which I am principal. Staff are often coming to me with problems large or small

with other staff in matters of personal style and execution of school duties and asking me, in essence, to resolve it on their behalf: to make the other guy tighten up or loosen up and act RIGHT.

Though we currently often invoke the need for diversity in community, I contend that most of us, most of the time, secretly wish that others would just get on board and think the same way. I recall in the early years of the NOC, Payson Kennedy, that wonderful and visionary founder, once saying:

“ I don’t want to boss people around; I just wish they would THINK like I do!”

And, indeed, community does involve having some basic shared values. But it also involves people with different strengths and traits moving those values forward, and when individuals are stuck in the image of a separate self from the world, we tend to fight and resist the strengths that others bring. The accountant who insists on proper forms being filled out and receipts being turned in is always nagging the carefree instructor who is brilliant in the field: one wishes the other would tighten up or loosen up, yet both are necessary. Parker Palmer, a visionary educator, once pointed out that the definition of community is to visualize someone that you can’t stand, then put that person in your community, because he or she will be there.

Yet many of us still behave like that person on an episode of *This American Life*, which chronicled a traveling repertory company doing the 60’s musical “Hair.” Much of the show talked about how everyone on the cast got into the love space, and all were travelling the country together in a veritable spasm of good feelings and affection,

but that, well, as one cast member put it, there were some people who didn't act as loving and free spirited as others and that if that kept up, then they wouldn't be in the show for long.... And you could hear his voice drop a register and practically see his eyes narrow.

For this is the trap of community: the definition of one by exclusion – by keeping others out who don't fit.

Remember, if you have a community where everyone thinks, acts, and looks alike, I would argue that what you have is a cult, not a sustainable community, and we know what often happens to them.

(Possible insertion of the Gurdjieff story of putting the most obnoxious person in the spiritual community on a paid retainer to always be there. Do this if there is time).

2. Okay, you might ask: very well – lose the sense of separate self and view a community of interdependent parts of which you are one. How to do that? For Americans, it's very hard: the cult of the individual is woven into our national self consciousness along with the legal language of the pursuit of happiness. It's a heroic myth of the individual as change agent that we cherish nationally.

My answer: we need to initiate and sustain a contemplative practice, a spiritual practice if you will, or at least a steady diet of mindfulness practice. That answer might surprise some, but let me clarify. Precisely because of the accelerating rate of change and the speed with which we live our lives, we are increasingly operating in an adrenalized fight or flight mode that I think deeply impairs our ability to see ourselves as part of the whole, as part of the pattern of the community and the world.

In a recent article in Utne Reader, community activists from all over the world were interviewed and many said that they were experiencing burnout, compassion fatigue, rage against the injustices against which they were working so hard to correct. On top of these stressors, many of them led days of long hours and tough meetings, on top of which they were often making financial sacrifices and having to deal with 100-300 actionable emails a day. AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! Sound familiar?

When I say that we need to maintain a practice of quiet focus that reveal the vast mental spaces within, I am not advocating one religion over another, nor even any religion at all, but I am talking about a steady practice of calm breathing and contemplation. It can function as a mental and spiritual equivalent of an oxygen mask that drops down in airplanes, we are told, in emergency situations: you have to put one on yourself first in order to be conscious to help others. Research has shown that the mental states of mindfulness practice can be achieved in secular fashion as well, as the research on the Relaxation response by Benson and Kabat Zinn's work on mindfulness for chronic pain patients at Massachussets General Hospital has shown. However, the great wisdom traditions of the world, including Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam all have remarkably similar language for gaining the balance and calm that come from regular quieting practices of calm contemplation, prayer, or mindful movement. The Dalai Lama himself has said that religion is not necessary, but that much good work has been done by the world's religions in creating these effective practices, and that he suggests people use the one that is most effective for them.

He suggests that this is usually the one in which you are raised, and not to substitute the novelty of different languages, robes, and ceremonies from different cultures unless you really find yourself drawn to them. But if you do, fine.

The result of all of these practices tends to be an expanded sense of self that includes others: I have noticed that the most spiritually driven practitioners of the world's religions tend to be the most tolerant of others, and I find this to be true in the workplace as well.

I would argue that this kind of personal work is essential to getting to an inclusive enough state of mind to accept and work toward change while handling the incredible diversity of human emotions and tolerances for change within your communities. There is a vast amount of literature available on this personal work: I have given a very short list of works that have been helpful to me with my contact information on a page that I can share with anyone interested in carrying this conversation forward. I can only relate my personal experience that a steady five year practice of seated meditation in the morning has helped me survive and even thrive in a job that many would perceive as high stress; the steady 60 hours a week job of the normal American high school principal, which includes dealing with massive amounts of paperwork, bomb threats, fights, angry parents, teachers and students, hostile school board members, and, oh yes, daily doses of laughter and sheer joy at watching young people succeed despite the odds. (Tell the story about my school and the woman who noticed that I never seemed to lose my temper: what kind of medication was I on?)

You do get to a place of radical acceptance if you stay the course of a spiritual practice, and that radical acceptance is a great place to build community that is truly inclusive:

For it is not so much to know the self  
As know it as it is known  
By galaxy and cedar cone  
As if birth had never found it,  
And death could never end it.

A.R. Ammons

But please be aware that one need not wait. Practice is perfect, not makes perfect; it has you dealing with things as they are. (Use the Dalai Lama's example of being rammed by the boat. No one in it. At whom do you direct your anger?) As a wonderful Buddhist nun said:

“ I cannot wait for my own enlightenment before I turn to helping others.”

Which leads me to

## **2. The establishment of patterns in community.**

I find it fascinating to condense the work of Everett Rogers, an early researcher on change in communities. Rogers achieved academic fame for his [diffusion of innovations](#) theory; his book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, is now in its fifth edition. He proposed that adopters of any new [innovation](#) or idea could be categorized as innovators (2.5%), [early adopters](#) (13.5%), early majority (34%), late majority (34%) and laggards (16%), based on the mathematically-based [Bell curve](#). These categories, based on standard deviations from the mean of the normal curve, provided a common language for innovation researchers.

Each adopter's willingness and ability to adopt an innovation would depend on their awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption. People could fall into different categories for different innovations -- a farmer might be an early adopter of hybrid corn, but a late majority adopter of [VCRs](#).

When graphed, the rate of adoption formed what came to typify the DOI model, an “s-shaped curve.” ([S curve](#)) The graph essentially shows a cumulative percentage of adopters over time – slow at the start, more rapid as adoption increases, then leveling off until only a small percentage of laggards have not adopted. (Rogers Diffusion Of Innovations 1983)

some of the rules of Change identified by researchers:

- \* It's a process, not an event.
- \* It's made by individuals first, then institutions.
- \* It's a highly personal experience
- \* It involves developmental growth in feelings and skills.

And as community leaders, the growth of the adults in our building is an indicator of their willingness to lead the children in the same process. And by this I mean the growth of all adults, including each of you spiritually – remember the first step of mindfulness practice.

( Insert here the lojang slogans, Pema Chodron's work, and the story of Eric Howard and being grateful to everyone – getting the lojang goin')

### 3. **Summary; where do we go from here?**

From my talk at AEE of 16 years ago, I've pulled the concepts of my belief that underlying all learning are the concepts of pattern establishment and pattern interrupts. Now, after 16 years in the field of public education, I've come to believe that the application of those concepts in community building are:

**First**, to apply the **breaking of patterns to oneself, including the limiting concept of a separate self**, in beginning and maintaining a contemplative practice that allows one to see one's connectedness to your own small local and the greater world community, and to genuinely see the necessity of those within those communities who see and do things differently. Be grateful to everyone.

**Second, within your community**, be aware of the research on the diffusion of change in the establishment of patterns within your community: remember to use the innovators, early adopters, early and late majority, and even the laggard resisters, each one offering their strengthening perspective, even if it seems only hostile.

**Third, be at peace with the possibility that you might not succeed** in your struggles to build worthwhile communities, but that is no reason not to try. I have benefited greatly from Joanne Macy's work: **World as Lover, World as Self**, a title that makes me cringe, setting off all my alarm bells that my skeptical self rings when hearing what I perceive to be New Age Fluff (which just shows you MY patterns and projections at work). This is a remarkably insightful and tough minded book that looks squarely at the mess that we are in and takes aim at how to live a mindful life while still engaged in social activism.

She calls the struggle of the human species to become aware enough of its own actions and consequences that it can live in balance on the planet The Great Turning of awareness. She writes:

“The Great Turning comes with no guarantees. Its risk of failure is its reality.... When you make peace with uncertainty, you find a kind of liberation. You are freed from bracing yourself against every piece of bad news, and from constantly having to work up a sense of hopefulness in order to act – which can be exhausting. There’s a certain equanimity and moral economy that comes when you are not constantly computing your chance of success. The enterprise is so vast, there is no way to judge the effects of this or that individual effort....Once we acknowledge this, we can enjoy the challenge and adventure. Then we can see that it is a privilege to be alive now in this Great Turning, when all the wisdom and courage ever harvested can be put to use.”

I think that this might speak to us here, those of us who have turned for recreation and renewal to sports where the outcome is often in doubt: trying climbs a little too hard for us, or taking on trail runs that end in benighted epics, or rapids that end in swims bruising to the butt and the ego. From these we take joy out of doubt, and courage out of our many little failures, and even have fun doing so. Don’t forget to have fun:to quote from Wendell Berry’s Mad Farmer Liberation Front of 1973:

**Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts.**

Be joyful, even after considering all the facts. Thanks for listening to me, and good luck in building up yourselves and your communities. If we have time, I'd be happy to take questions, or arrange to talk more this evening. I've put a sheet with my contact information and some recommended follow up reading for you to pursue if you so wish.

At the end:

Lighten up:

Remember EB White's comment about waking up every morning, torn between the desire to save the world and the inclination to savor it.

Remember Ed Abbey's great quote about getting out into the places we love while there is still time.

The Mary Oliver quote about what will you do with your one wild and precious life?

Thich Nat Hanh: Happiness is available; please help yourself to some.

Remember also to tell folks about the contact information and follow up reading list