

# Community Building



# COMMUNITY BUILDING

---

Values for a Sustainable Future

LEONARD A. JASON

---

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut  
London

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jason, Leonard.

Community building : values for a sustainable future / Leonard A. Jason.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 0-275-95872-8 (alk. paper)

1. Community. 2. Interpersonal relations. 3. Interpersonal communication. 4. Social interaction. 5. Community organization.

I. Title

HM131.J35 1997

307—dc21 96-53938

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 1997 by Leonard A. Jason

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, by any process or technique, without the express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-53938

ISBN: 0-275-95872-8

First published in 1997

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881  
An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To those unheralded citizens and activists  
who are building a sense of community in every village, town, and city.



# Contents

Foreword: Communication and Community Building <i>Mara B. Adelman and Lawrence R. Frey</i>	ix
Foreword: New Vistas for Community Psychology <i>John Moritsugu</i>	xiii
Preface	xv
1. Society at the Crossroads	1
2. Four Vulnerabilities	7
3. A New Paradigm for Hope	25
4. Religion and Spirituality	53
5. A Sense of Community	71
6. Partnerships with Communities	89
7. Wisdom Traditions as Our Guide	101
Afterword: An Eco-Transformational Application: Bridging the Macro to the Micro <i>Patricia A. Fennell</i>	111
Notes	115
References	125

Index	141
About the Author and Contributors	153

# Foreword: Communication and Community Building

Communication and community grow in each other's shadows; the possibilities of one are structured by the possibilities of the other.

—E. W. Rothenbuhler

*The Process of Community Involvement*

What is it about the concept of “community” that compels the imagination of scholars, practitioners, and the public alike? The mourning for the death of community, coupled with rhetorical appeals for community from virtually all sectors of our society—from neighborhood watch groups to presidents (“It takes a village”)—demonstrates the profound yearning for connection in our culture. But what is it that we have lost and are trying to reclaim?

Leonard Jason's book goes a long way toward answering this question. His tour of community—from philosophy to physics, from ecology to mythology, and from religion and spirituality to psychoneuroimmunology—reveals many of the values we appear to have lost along the way. His text adds an important voice to the collective body of literature that speaks to the longing for community in the postmodern era, when the forces of urbanization, industrialization, and technology make it seemingly impossible for people to connect meaningfully with others (see Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, 1991; Gergen, 1991; Meyrowitz, 1985).

Longing for community has always been a central theme of our col-

lective psyche. In this culture there is a love-hate relationship with community; people wish to be both apart from and a part of others. Alexis de Toqueville, an astute observer of the cultural landscape, noted how “strange” Americans were—rabid about their individualism, yet amazingly, a country of joiners where voluntary associations abounded even as their members remained islands unto themselves. This tightrope between individualism and collective action cannot be negated in our visions of community. In part, the struggle for individualism is not merely ideological but also a response to saturation by social obligations and information overload. Sustaining meaningful ties thus also necessitates periods of seclusion and reflection. How revealing that one of the most eloquent spokespersons on the theme of community is the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who lived much of his life in solitude.

Given the perceived chaos of the contemporary world, it is easy to romanticize the communities of yesteryear, seeking to build bridges to the past in the hopes of directing our future. But let’s not forget how insulated many of those communities were, their members accepted only if they were of a certain race, religion, or ethnicity, and only if they followed strict rules of conduct. As Shafer and Anundsen (1993) remind us:

As tightly knit and stable as most old-style communities were, they were also homogeneous, suspicious of outsiders, socially and economically stratified, emotionally stifling, and limited in opportunities for personal and professional development. So long as members belonged to the right ethnic, religious, or racial groups—or stayed in their place if they did not—and behaved within a narrowly defined set of parameters, they could count on strong communal support. But if they strayed too far outside the lines, their fellow community members might well shun or harass them. (p. 6)

In our contemporary multicultural world, these are clearly not the types of communities we wish to emulate. There simply is no single vision of community to behold; today the test of social connection has as much to do with creating a space for difference and dissent as it does with sustaining collective visions and values.

What is it then that can bind us together into the type of collective structure that Friedman (1986) calls “a community of otherness,” where confirmation of others walks hand-in-hand with the struggle over ideas and principles? Leonard Jason makes a valuable contribution in identifying symbolic practices as the thread for weaving community. The psychological sense of community, where people feel emotionally connected, that Jason and others (for example, McMillan & Chavis, 1986) adopt is created and sustained in communicative practices. As we have argued, “Ultimately, community is a social construction, grounded in the sym-

bolic meanings and communicative practices of individuals, that fosters meaningful human interdependence in social aggregates. . . . Communication is thus the essential, defining feature—the medium—of community” (Adelman & Frey, 1997, p. 5).

Leonard Jason identifies some of the grand symbolic practices—the myths, rituals, and customs—that can help develop a more robust sense of community and energize community members. Our sense of social connection is also woven just as tightly in the small, even mundane, communicative practices of everyday life: the daily salutations to the mail carrier, the monthly bingo game where the same stories are told over and over, and the small talk at the local check-out counter. It is in everyday talk, microlevel interactions, and even fleeting encounters that we weave together the communal cloth and provide a foundation for larger collective action. While concrete everyday communicative practices without grand rhetorical gestures are like threads without stitching, grand rhetorical gestures without concrete everyday practices are loose stitches that soon disintegrate.

Throughout this text, Jason provides us with many concrete examples of highly textured communities that attempt to weave together the various levels of symbolic practices. He mentions the work we have been doing for the past eight years on communication and community at Bonaventure House, a residential facility for people with AIDS (for a synthesis of this research program, see Adelman & Frey, 1997). People often assume that living together with a life-threatening illness would be a great equalizer and a common bond for residents that makes community easy to achieve. But facing mortality, coping with illness, and experiencing the continual loss of others can be a frightening and self-absorbing journey that makes connection extremely difficult. Amidst this fragile and poignant drama, stability is created and sustained through communicative practices that grease the communal wheel and provide a sense of meaning within chaos. Collective practices, such as the balloon ceremony, a bereavement ritual where residents gather together and simultaneously release colored balloons, signify both the release of the deceased from suffering and the letting go of someone unique and special. These rituals are highly visible anchors for communal life. But stability is also found in the more personalized exchanges, from taking a fellow resident to chemotherapy to sharing a pack of gum. It is embedded in the visual artifacts found in scrapbooks created for the house and personal possessions left to others after death—legacies for collective memory. And it is found in the gossip, protests, and arguments that bond residents in acts of solidarity as they “fight to keep warm” (Myerhoff, 1978).

The grand and ordinary practices at Bonaventure House also reveal something very important about the symbolic construction of commu-

nity—that the tensions of every day life are never resolved but instead are massaged day by day. In that sense, community is never complete, never finished. Part of the problem that we face is the paucity of our symbol system for talking about community. We reference community as a noun, like some construction project that is finished when particular types of communication are practiced. But community is better referenced as a verb, as processual and continually in flux. We must never forget that it is *community building*, and this “ing” is often disorderly, rebellious, and messy.

The process nature of community means that while we have some traditional maps that provide well-worn paths for guiding this process, we must also generate new trails and discover innovative modes for connecting and affirming social ties. For example, the NAMES Quilt for people who have died from AIDS unites people in both remembering and re-membering. Quilting bees are resurrected from time-worn traditions as both social activity and social activism, as action and symbol. Even as the quilt is displayed on America’s front lawn of the Washington Mall, friends and family are busy stitching new panels in a tent nearby.

In the course of everyday life, there are many opportunities for enhancing the psychological sense of community that seem to elude us. Jason’s text helps us better understand some of the symbolic practices and values that can help create and sustain what is clearly a day-to-day communal journey.

—Mara B. Adelman, Ph.D.  
Seattle University

—Lawrence R. Frey, Ph.D.  
Loyola University Chicago

# Foreword: New Vistas for Community Psychology

I am honored to provide a foreword to *Community Building: Values for a Sustainable Future*. The book is both pragmatically and theoretically useful to the field of community psychology. In the best traditions of the discipline, Leonard Jason asks us to consider the concepts and values that drive our interventions and then to act on the basis of these values. The book answers the two most asked questions of any interventionist in the community: What can you really do for the neighborhood?, and Why are you interested in doing these things?

Jason addresses the process of acting in the real world. He uses a multidisciplinary perspective to derive the values by which we should act. He reminds us of the strengths of wisdom traditions that have given us direction in the past and can provide us with a sense of direction for the future. Especially in times of great and rapid change, the evolution of cultures seems strained to keep up with the human needs for purpose and meaning. The complexity of the post-modern world is daunting. In facing these seemingly insolvable puzzles, Jason reminds us of the power of two human resources: our communities and our spiritual traditions. He explores the thesis that these two resources can reinforce each other and in turn provide the answers for the crises of our times. The community psychologist comes down on the side of affiliation and meaning, connection and purpose, rather than isolation and alienation.

The wisdom traditions of the world have contended with the importance of both community and perspective. Jason asks us to consider the salutary effects of these basic human endeavors. He envisions commu-

nity psychology facilitating efforts to create social networks and coherence. His observations come from one who has been active and successful in community interventions. His programs are effective in bringing about positive and sustainable change. He has let us in on his secret ingredient: The interventions are driven by soul. Rather than focusing on the conflict between knowledge and wisdom, Jason challenges us to look at the transactions between the two. He argues that the combination of the two makes for transformational programming.

While the proposition seems at once controversial and obvious, the contradictory reaction may reflect the inherent conflict within our discipline. We are historically a discipline that respects the objective and the subjective, the norm and the variance, the philosophical and the psychophysical. Jason's programmatic results strongly support the advantages of a dialectical and transformational model in the building of communities.

Jason has given us what we have come to expect of him, a work that demonstrates a wide-ranging and systemic view, that presents a challenging premise and the data to support his thesis. I am reminded of Thomas Kuhn's admonishment that our paradigms both help and hinder our understanding of the world and that progress is measured by the development of constructs that better fit the data at hand. Jason's proposition moves us to a better fit. It is in line with the recent works of Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*), Thomas Moore (*Care of the Soul* and *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*) and Robert Kegan (*In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*). We are in search of new ways to understand and honor our old yearnings in present contexts. We are in search of a sustainable future. This work advances our discussion of what that might be.

—John Moritsugu, Ph.D.  
Pacific Lutheran University

# Preface

Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn't. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you.

—Carlos Castaneda  
*The Teachings of Don Juan*

American society has been in an accelerated state of transition for the past few decades. In the 1950s, approximately 70 percent of American households consisted of a husband working and a wife caring for the children at home. Today, only 8 percent of households fit this model (Yankelovich, 1993/94). In addition, 72 percent of Americans do not know their neighbors well; 66 percent have never worked with others to solve community problems; and when asked what traits contemporary Americans are more likely to embody than Americans of the past, interviewees select adjectives such as "materialistic," "selfish," "phony," and "skeptical" (Patterson & Kim, 1993/94).

In this book I describe a series of vulnerabilities that help account for many of the serious problems facing contemporary society in industrialized countries, including high crime rates; homelessness; alcohol, tobacco, and other drug addictions; and a pervasive sense of isolation and alienation, even within communities that once nurtured and protected

their members. Meaningful connections within historical, philosophical, and epistemological issues are also explored as a foundation for understanding what appears to have gone wrong.

We are well aware of the need to effect change, build on communities' strengths, and stem the waste created by our society's problems (Caplan, 1964). While we have made strides in knowledge and understanding and have attempted to translate our insights into better social conditions, some believe that the fabric of our society is ripping. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton (1985) suggest that, for many individuals, the meaning of life has been tied to increasing income and status, yet few are satisfied with such utter self-absorption. The lack of more satisfying symbols and goals may be weakening today's society. Faced with the enormity of our problems, we must not only look critically at current approaches but also reevaluate the frameworks and values that drive these approaches.

In this examination we find that something vital is lacking: a true sense of belonging and connectedness within communities. Integral to understanding connectedness or community is the concept of "psychological sense of community" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sarason (1974) originally defined this concept to mean a supportive network, a stable structure that one can depend on for psychological significance and identification. Sarason further stated that developing this sense of community is one of life's major tasks and should be the overarching goal of all community interventions. If loss of community or connectedness is indeed an underlying root of many modern problems, then appreciating and understanding the development of community might well contribute to the analysis of more specific problems and—better yet—their resolution.

An historical perspective, described in chapter 2, takes into account changes that have put society at risk for its current problems and provides a way to explore and eventually address these problems on a deeper level. According to Morgan (1942), people have lived throughout history in communal dwellings. It was within the village that people helped one another not out of charity but because it was the natural way of life. At times, village life was burdened with narrowness and provincialism; however, the strong positive features of mutual respect, shared goals, cooperation, and neighborliness provided nurturance and meaning. Morgan suggests that these communities fostered natural, spontaneous interpersonal relations that grew from mutual affection, customs, and traditions. In comparison, after the onset of the Industrial Revolution, modern societies began to feature formal organizations, contracts, and legislatures. Modern societies have greater individual freedom, but the cost has been a decline in human connectedness, community spirit, and neighborliness (McLaughlin & Davidson, 1985).

Over the past 150 years, sociologists and anthropologists have noticed a change in values within our culture. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, people had specific roles in crafts and farming, and these jobs provided meaning to their lives. As more people moved from the villages to the cities, severing long-term bonds with the land, family and community traditions began to weaken. Stein (1960) traced the effects of urbanization, industrialization, and bureaucratization on the transformation of America. He concluded that industrialization replaced a sense of coherence and satisfaction with one's craft with a new emphasis on prospering financially.

The Industrial Revolution marks a major shift in the experience of community for many people, but other forces may also have contributed to the reduction in sense of community. When societal and community norms, such as culture, rituals, and customs, weaken, people tend to lose their sense of coherence and their interest in community participation. Changing values and beliefs and the general loss of connectedness have corresponded with an increasing focus on the individual. In the 1940s and 1950s, there was a new dedication to an ever-rising standard of living, which justified the industrial work role. The local community ceased to be a place that mattered, and life transitions were minimized or performed perfunctorily by impersonal social agencies, schools, or churches (Stein, 1960). High levels of alienation and isolation occurred.

Spretnak (1991) offers a provocative set of propositions concerning vulnerabilities that occurred even before the Industrial Revolution. She believes that many maladies of our modern world are consequences of our tendency to try to dominate the forces of nature rather than to live in respectful balance with them. For Spretnak, a breakdown in the sense of community was inevitable once we started to consider the larger forces of nature to be engulfing and devouring and the ideal became self preservation and control. Finding a balance with nature by reducing pollution, controlling overpopulation, and preserving the land might give people the resources to nurture their communities. Through this redevelopment of a sense of community in balance with nature, we might ensure the survival of our species.

The Scientific Revolution has provided a valuable way to understand and improve the natural world, yet it may have shaken our sense of community. Although we can appreciate the enormous improvements in our world that science has made—for example, the sophisticated treatment of diseases and more efficient agricultural methods—the passion to understand and improve upon nature may have contributed to a crisis in values and belief systems. As science prospered, some began to believe that intellectual prowess and achievement were the only symbols of success (Bartel & Guskin, 1971). Others, including many existentialists (Sartre, 1956), proposed that religions and myths, which had once guided

people through their lives, were antiquated and no longer relevant. Campbell (1949) maintains that many of our modern-day problems result from the decline of symbols, images, and myths as nurturing and validating rituals in our lives. This breakdown in a culturally transmitted sense of coherence and meaning may also have contributed to a reduction in our sense of community.

This book neither denies nor devalues the many contributions made by western civilization. Many people in urban settings have been able to integrate old and new traditions and to develop a sense of community. In addition, there are individuals in industrial societies who maintain the traditions, values, and myths that effectively guided their ancestors. However, many others in our mobile, industrial society lack a community of reference; the rich ties to their past belief systems and customs have been weakened. Thus we may need to take these factors into account in designing social and community interventions. Chapter 3 provides possible solutions to some of these problems, borrowing heavily from new developments in a variety of fields, including education, philosophy, and technology.

Smith (1994) has summarized some of the perils of post-modern selfhood, including the fading of religion as a moral guide and the wish to manipulate the external world for one's own personal ends. For many, the result has been a loss of hope, absence of community, and a loss of tradition and shared meaning. In chapter 4, I review eastern and western religions that hold traditions to which we may look for moral guidance and inspiration. The energizing symbols and messages of these faiths may be employed to restore a sense of shared meaning and to develop a more robust sense of community.

Ruth Benedict, Paul Radin, Meyer Fortes, and E. R. Leach explored cultures in which everyday life was imaginatively transformed and saturated with meaning (Stein, 1960). In these cultures life transformations were honored, and people lived their lives in balance with nature. Certainly, many people continue to guide their lives with the help of vital and energizing symbols and images. Many achieve a balance between modern civilized life and nature and maintain rituals and customs to help make life more meaningful and comprehensible. It is to these people that we should look for guidance on how to strengthen our connectedness to one another and to the world in a larger sense.

While it is essential to examine all of the elements necessary for the formation of healthy and nurturing communities, no such examination would be complete without concrete examples of how these elements are being used today to promote human well-being and social improvement. In chapters 5 and 6, I explore real-world models of community that effectively address some of today's devastating problems. These communities may not have surmounted all the problems of modern society, but

they are working for their members in significant ways. The final chapters provide many such examples, from communities of healing to successful community-based interventions.

My hope is that present and future generations of helping professionals will look to the wisdom of the ancient past, the hard lessons of history, and the most innovative efforts of the present. It is in the synthesis of these three worlds that our greatest hope for the future resides.

This book provides a distinct analysis of problems faced by contemporary Americans and offers potential sources of solutions. Other books have presented more limited perspectives or analyses of these topics. For example, feminist theorists such as Charlene Spretnak (1991) have tended to focus on risk factors resulting from our attempts to dominate nature rather than to live with nature in an interconnected way. However, relevant psychological and sociological theories have been sometimes neglected in the feminists' work. Psychoanalysts have embraced the vulnerability that springs from our genetic animal ancestry. Community psychologists and sociologists have focused on the unintended consequences of the Industrial Revolution, including our loss of connection with the land and traditional crafts. The thesis of this book is that all of these vulnerabilities need to be conceptualized together if we are to undertake a comprehensive and thorough analysis of the factors predisposing our society to its significant social problems. This book is unique in its proposals for ecological and community-building interventions and for systemic solutions that extend beyond the focus on the individual that has increasingly been recognized as limited and ineffective.

The audience for this book includes concerned and educated Americans who are searching for a scholarly and cogent presentation of our present social difficulties and their predisposing factors. Another group of potentially interested readers are public policy officials and administrators who are seeking cost-effective and meaningful solutions to our ubiquitous social problems. Finally, readers with interests in mythology, religious experience, and philosophy will be particularly interested in this book because these topics are reviewed from a fresh perspective, one that shows how concepts from these domains can reenergize the search for a deeper meaning in life and the quest for more effective ways of honoring life transitions. Americans are increasingly interested in seeking solutions to our social problems. This book provides a synthesis of stimulating and thought-provoking ideas that could lead to these solutions.

I wish to thank the many people who have contributed to the formulation of many of the ideas expressed in this book. I am most appreciative of the constructive and valuable feedback I received from undergraduate and graduate students at DePaul University while writing this book. To my colleagues at DePaul University, including Sheldon

Cotler, Sheila Ribordy, Karen Budd, Kathrine Grant, LaVome Robinson, Rod Watts, Joseph Ferrari, Karen Jordan, Susan Dvorak McMahon, and Gary Harper, my thanks for their friendship and their unstinting support of my work. Other friends and colleagues, including Pat Fennell, Barbara Pino, Thomas Wolff, Mara Adelman, Lawrence Frey, Stevan Hobfoll, Laura Sklansky, Jennifer O'Hara, Susan Rosenthal, Lisa Belar, Julie Rosenberg, Sharon Cohen, Patricia Novak, Barbara Sommers, Jerry Wolanka, Fred Friedberg, David Glenwick, John Moritsugu, Cliff Brickman, Arne Reichler, Jeffrey Messerer, Richard Katz, Jennifer O'Hara, Gretchen Otten, Olga Reyes, Anne Bogat, Jean Rhodes, Jean Hill, Doreen Salina, Roger Weissberg, Chris Keys, Dick Winett, Tom Gullotta, Joe Zins, Judith Albino, Maureen Minogue, Fabricio Balcazar, Yolanda Suarez, Joseph Durlak, Sonora Guldi, Marty Greenberg, Judy Richman, Andy and Sigita Plioplys, Bill McCreddie, Fred Rademaker, Emory Cowen, Edwin Zolik, Stephen Goldston, and Jim Kelly, were inspirational sources of support and guidance. From Barbara Sylvestri, Buzz Talbot, Donna Stein, Jim LeRoy, Dvorah Budnick, David Lipkin, Diane Allene, and Carole Howard, I learned the importance of creativity and collaboration when one is working on community change. From Beth Ferris, Verna Kragnes, Rick Hall, Darryl Eisenberg, and Steve Everett I experienced firsthand the healing capacities of hope and community building. From my family, including Jay and Lynn Jason; Diane, George, David, Johnathan, and Lisa Allen; Calvin Peltz, Sid and Joy Roth; Shirley and Mark Circus; Berry Levy; Sherry Kress; and Terri Foote; Edith and Allen Stern, Nancy and Adi Shatz; and Alvin, Sonja, and Joanna Wicks, I learned the importance of wisdom, humor, and patience.

I wish to thank the people at Praeger—particularly Marilyn Brownstein, Jean Lynch, Michelle Scott, and Nita Romer—for believing in this project. Harriet Melrose, Dana Clealy, and Meg Davis-Curtin were most helpful in editing several sections of this book. And finally, with elegance and imagination, Pam Woll did an extraordinary job of editing the entire book.