

Breaking the Beautiful Circle:

Could Communitas have saved the Community of Ferguson?

Wes Chester, MA, CAGS

In this, the second article in a series on Community, we'll look at the challenges of community as the phrase is ordinarily used, and how it is differentiated from the *emergent quality of communitas*. We noted in October, that the safety of stable relationships in supportive learning community raises the tolerance for the unknown. This principle lies at the heart of artistic and therapeutic endeavors. Through common experience, and common risk, a beautiful circle of trust is built. Within that circle, learning, growth and even radical change are supported.

The metaphor of the circle is unequalled as a symbol of an ideal relational community. There are leaders in the sense of organization and facilitation, but the hierarchical nature is kept to a minimum. And geometrically, the circle gives us the archway that supports a Cathedral, or the wheel upon which a train might ride. At the institute we literally sit in a circle for most functions of community interaction, so there is no "head of the class" or "back of the room." The circle in the lore of symbolic imagery describes perfection, symmetry and infinity, cycles and seasons. It also evokes ideas of enclosure, safety (as in circling the wagons), impenetrability, and of completeness.

So why is it necessary, even vital, to break the shining circle of community?

The very ideas that initially lend community a sense of safety; boundaries, completeness and impenetrability, eventually lead towards exclusion. When the post-modern philosopher Jaques Derrida wrote about community, he considered homogeneity and exclusivity to be its most dangerous traits. Working in the post-Holocaust era, Derrida saw the exclusion borne community building as the road towards de-humanizing, or other-ing persons, devaluing them because they are seen as different.

There are many examples of such "othering" in our current world: The religious wars of the Middle East are no longer limited to conflicts between religions. The most numerous killings are currently between Shia and Sunni, both sects of the same Islamic faith. Meanwhile in the US, the inequality of people strains the seams of common experience. We find ourselves acrimoniously divided by disparate beliefs and philosophies that stem in part, from radically differing experiences in the world. There is Democratic and a Republican America, a rich and poor America, and as the recent tragedies of Ferguson and Staten Island point out, there is a Black America and a White America. There is, in fact, an argument to be made, that the more defined the boundaries of a community become, the greater the pressure towards continuing degrees of fragmentation.

A Craving for Community

In the 2010's, it sometimes appears as if we have returned to a norm of separate, hermetic communities for our citizenry, our communities divided by class, race, ethnicity, gender, religion and sexual preference. Perhaps it's an artifact of winner take all politics, or our particular brand of egocentric market capitalism, but in any case, Derrida's worst fears about community seem to be coming to pass. The majority of Americans under 40 have never had a dependable career, a permanent home or stable relationship that can serve as insulation against the anxiety of constant and unremitting change that market capitalism requires to function. Even marriages fail more often than succeed. It's easy to see why such "closed circles" become attractive. Joining a closed community, organized around a center of personal self-interest (while often casting aspersions and blame on "others"), seems like an answer to the longing for stability. But ironically, they make our society less stable, moving us away from the "unity" that is the central promise of a true community.

In a world of closed communities, conflict becomes almost unavoidable. The power of inclusion, a benefit of true community, is eclipsed by the power to exclude. And the boundaries formed by membership contribute to the isolation endemic in modern life. Inclusion isn't simply solved by size. A closed community of 10,000, that clings to a single belief or origin story as a rationale for membership is exclusive and exclusionary, becoming self-referential, and dogmatic.

If community is at the core of our work, how can we avoid the pitfalls of exclusion and division that so plagues our contemporary society? As an Expressive Arts visionary Herbert Eberhardt would remind us, the solution for a problem often exists already within the problem. Often what is necessary is to formulate a "better question," for instance:

How can we, as artists and expressive arts practitioners, recover the power of community and communitas to unite, instead of divide?

Building Peace by Breaking Boundaries

Expressive Arts communities are organized primarily through work in community art. So, simply having people in one place, for one purpose does not make a community. Those persons need common experience, in an atmosphere of trust and open communication. But according to cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, the emergence of communitas requires something more than additional structure. Communitas, he believed, emerged in the presence of liminal experience, in the

place where the normal rules, roles and habitual structures of society lose their grip to the momentary experience of unity outside of those normal bounds. These experiences may come by the way of play, ritual or art making, but they must be substantial, not theoretical experiences. There must also be a mechanism for feedback, sharing and communication of the experience between members of the group. There are three points for consideration in such a structure:

The container or frame for such an experience needs to be both firm, and penetrable. For instance, a ritual that requires special knowledge or world-view (menschenbild) is not desirable. While it may make a beautiful and firm structure, it is exclusive of outsiders, and the uninitiated. Because the Expressive Arts Community is meant to value inclusion over exclusion, structures that promote dogma, or the homogenization of belief and meaning making must be rejected. Open structures, where experiencing is communal, while meaning making is emergent, and individual, are highly desirable.

The 'I' and the "We" According to Knill (Principles and Practice of Expressive Arts Therapy, Ch. 2) finding the relationship of our individual self, and our self-in-community is a primary task of community art. In addition to being penetrable, the structure must be able to accept a level of individual freedom, without total disruption, or it loses authenticity in favor of artifice. A community art frame that is to provide the safety and security needed for authentic experience must have a score that bounds the communal experience, while preserving the quality of emergence. In the artistic tradition, this type of experience is often provided by a scored improvisation, which allows for individual expression within a defined task.

For example, suppose there is a simple task set forth: A two minute movement performance in which everyone will cross the room from corner to corner, but in their own pace, and with their own movement quality. In the performance there is nearly infinite possibility for individual accommodation, but at the end of two minutes, each person will have the experience of crossing the room, in a style unique to their own experience, yet consciously in the presence of others.

Sharing and Harvesting to Promote Empathy.

Any communal experience might bring a person towards feelings of inclusion or belonging. But a specific structure for sharing the experience greatly raises the possibility that an inclusive group identity becomes emergent. The "We" becomes a dance company, a group of muralists, or musicians, when they share their experience, their observations of the work, the challenges they faced in creating, and their reflection about the significance of the image within their own life. (Scholars of Knill may recall his rubric Su-P-E-R Surface, Process, Experience and Reflection) A

good facilitator can sometimes identify themes in common among group members, which is very helpful.

Finally, it is equally important that the facilitator note and amplify the "minority voice." This may be the one person in the room that hated the dance or music structure, or "could not get into" the process. Through the process of inviting all experiences of the work as valid, we avoid the tyranny of the majority opinion, and the urge to make the dissenting voice "exceptional." By welcoming these opinions as equally valid, the aesthetic analysis of our communal art making experience becomes inclusive, and others are invited to empathize and accept the normality of differing experiences. Normalizing change and difference promotes resilience in conflict, and empowerment in the face of challenge.

In summary, resilient communities are based upon mutual experience, which is inclusive, rather than common belief, which is exclusive. Indicators of this resilience are:

- Communities that foster and promote both unity and empathy for individual circumstances.
- Communities that invite diversity of opinion and experience.
- Communities that offer flexibility and openness to change and new ideas.
- Communities that offer authentic mechanisms for support without resorting to ideas of scarcity and competition.

Communities that resist fragmentation are communities that have shared experience, and at least occasionally, *the experience of communitas*. Such communities foster empathy and compassion. They are not based upon geography, or accident of birth, nor upon common ancestry or common faith. They are based in common creation, of real work in the world. They fight exclusion, invite dissent, promote innovation, and resist dogma. They focus on broadening the base of resources by opening the doors, and breaking the false safety of the closed circle, that they might embrace the deeper understanding of the gift of welcoming the stranger.

I can end with no wiser words than those of Paolo Knill, my friend, and mentor these many years, who has by habit ended his community art structures with the ritual of enlarging the circle until hands can no longer be clasped: "We must always break the circle, to let in new people and new ideas...else we become a cult."