Friends of the Sojourner Truth Library

Fifth Annual Dennis O’Keefe Memorial Lecture

“College and Community in New Paltz and America”

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Coykendall Science Building Auditorium

State University of New York at New Paltz
Thanks for that gracious introduction.

I’ve spent the better part of half a century liberally expressing myself in and around New Paltz, often in very public places, on any number of topics. And still, there are a few colleagues and friends and neighbors and students who will come out to hear what’s on my mind.

It’s gratifying.

But why would people around here do that? What brings us together tonight?

- Maybe it’s the food. CAS and The Friends of the Library always does a good job with that. I learned early on when I started organizing meetings. A core adage for successful academic administration: “Feed them and they will come.”

- Maybe it’s the memory of Dennis O’Keefe. I still look expectantly to my right when I walk in our Sojourner Truth Library, ready to say “hello” to Dennis. Dennis came to embody the library in his person. He truly found his place here, and in doing so in some special way defined this place for us. It’s hard to believe that this is the fifth annual occasion on which we are honoring Dennis’s life and contributions at this event, named in his memory. In a way, he’s still in the room. Getting us together. And ready to listen to and talk about something he cared about.

- Maybe it’s the library. I was at the Elting library fair in our village this summer, indulging my insatiable diet for mystery novels. I buy them at Elting. I read them. I give them to ST. And vice versa. (I became less self conscious about this obsession when one lunchtime when I first began as Dean I visited my boss, Bill Vasse, then Provost. I was not expected. I found Bill deep into a mystery novel, over a sandwich. If a classy guy like that read them, well they must be OK, I thought to myself.)

One of our great volunteers, Sally Rhodes, was being honored for her decades of running the book sale at the Elting Fair. And she pointed out on that day the fair was truly a celebration of community. It was for everyone. Inclusive. Anticipated.

- Or maybe it’s the topic. Think about it.

Now all of us in this room may not know each other, at least till now. So take a second. Say hello to the person to your left. And the person to you right. Because right now - here, in this room, together - we are doing two things simultaneously: we are experiencing community and we are creating it. Not on purpose. Just by showing up. Its wonderfully mysterious, this thing that we are doing together in this room, right now.

But what exactly is it, this “community” that I’m talking about?

I did a little research. And it turns out that this question is not so easy to answer.

Some of you know. I am hardly thoroughly modern, like Millie. But I do know about the internet. So I googled the word “community.” (“Googled! Interesting what passes for a verb these days!”) Google found me slightly over 4.9 billion references to the word community on the internet.

I thought, “I need to narrow this down.”

The SUNY unified catalog: 83,973

The Sojourner truth library catalog: 6,160

The SUNY New Paltz website: 1,630

So what I learned is the word “community” is used a lot. And when this happens to a word, one thing for sure: its meaning becomes elusive. So we have:

- People who do the same sorts of work – Scholarly community, Military community
- People with a shared interest – economic, social political -- sometimes very broadly defined – business community, environmental community, intelligence community
- People who work in the same kinds of institutions – academic community
• Or in single institutions – New Paltz College campus community

• Or in the same profession: the political science community

• Or subgroups of a larger group, with a shared identifying characteristic – Race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion – Black community, gay community, Hispanic community, Christian community, Moslem community, Jewish community

A first thing emerges, one commonality:

• Community is associational. It is about people in relationships. People connected to one another. People interacting. Like we are. Here. Talking and listening.

But that does not capture all of what I mean. Let me suggest four more aspects that help separate the idea of community that I am talking with you about here, tonight, from many of the pervasive usages that are abroad of the word “community.”

• A second key dimension is that of “place.” Sharing a place is central to my idea of community. We can’t fully realize community if we are not in the same place, if we are not at some times in each others’ presence.

• Shared place creates the possibility for a third key dimension, face-to-face interaction.

  o You may never have talked to some people in your community, but there is a chance that you will some day, unexpectedly – like tonight – because you find yourself in the same place, with a shared connection to that place.

  o I think that casual daily interactions with people who become familiar but aren’t really known – in the supermarket, dry cleaner, convenience store - are an essential element of community.

  o My idea of community also involves the dimension of “involuntary interaction” as a consequence of being in the same place. In this way community is like family. It has a certain claim upon you simply because it is there, and you are there.
Imagine that you’re walking down the street and a person who you may have seen before but whose name you don’t know comes towards you. Or you may have never seen her. In a community, one of you says “good morning.” The other most often replies, “good morning.” This happens a lot on Main Street in New Paltz. It does not often happen on Columbus Avenue in NYC. Sometimes, But not often.

In a community you have to actively resist, deny that casual claim on you, or it persists, it is present, always latent and potentially engaging.

One day you give in, and write that letter to the editor of the New Paltz News, praising or denouncing someone, or something, in our community. Then you step more fully in.

- The economist E.F. Schumacher taught us that “small is beautiful.” Certainly, small is communal. Limited scale arises from and allows shared place and face-to-face interaction, and therefore allows building and sustaining the kind of community I am talking with you about today.

Like “community,” the meaning of small is a hard to pin down. It has both geographic and population dimensions. Oddly, an example from big cities helps us grasp the point. Tony Hiss has written: “…All city neighborhoods have stayed roughly the same size for 5,000 years or more. They're based on a low-tech, really a pre-tech, idea -- even in our post-Interstate, dawn-of-the-Information Highway era, a New York neighborhood is only about a 15-minute walk wide. It's a series of footpaths defined by ordinary chores -- and also by something more, something that accumulates. It's everywhere we can get to and bring stuff home from before our feet get too tired.” But it's also everything that happens to us every day along the way -- street sweepers swishing the streets at dawn, car alarms going off all day (and night), bus fumes, garlic roasting, coffee brewing, sunlight bouncing off walls and windows, shoplights spilling onto night-time sidewalks. And all the people we see and pass and talk to. Without our asking for it, and sometimes without our even noticing it, by
trudging along through the daily round, good neighborhoods start to weave us together.

- Fourth, there is an element of will. This cuts in at least two directions.
  
  - A person can be in a place and passively accept being in the community. But that person may be in a place and, by choice, not be a member of the community. She may not say “good morning,” on principle. He may not reply, on principle.

    Bah, humbug!

  - Or others can choose to exclude some people in a place from the community. Exclusion sounds bad; it resonates of meanness, and bigotry. Go see the movie “The Help.” But in fact community implies boundaries. Some people are in, some not in. Are homeless people on our New Paltz Main Street in our community, or just in our place? Or even more provocative, are students who are “passing through” members of our community?

- Fifth, there are shared institutions. These touch or have touched all lives in the community. I mentioned the library, or libraries. There are also the schools. The Community Newspaper (and now also its website). And our local governments. We are served by them. We pay for them. We are directed, even commanded by them.

  Not all of these institutions are public; some are private businesses. Think about The Bakery. Think about Dederick’s Drug Store. We are urged to “buy local.” That really means “sustain our community.” And if the price is a bit higher compared to bigger chain stores, some of us decide to pay extra – pay a sort of voluntary tax – to do so. That’s because we are protecting what Randy Hester, the landscape architect at U.C. Berkeley, many years ago called our community’s “sacred sites.” (This is a little different than our summer school “sacred spaces” course focus, but maybe not too different.)

I value this idea of community, the one I have been describing to you here, because it increases the chance to live a full, rich, consequential life. (What else for a former Liberal
Arts Dean?): to have a say; to count for something; to being uniquely present for others; to achieve a fairer, more just, more democratic society; to have some enduring impact.

There are barriers to be overcome in achieving this kind of community.

- At the grandest scale, it needs mentioning that the idea of community was not from the first at the center of the American organizing paradigm. It was Aristotle (not David Brooks) who first famously observed that "Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god." But in our culture – shaped in the Enlightenment era - we elevate the individual, not the community, man and woman, not society or community.

  o Individual achievement, against all odds. Horatio Alger.

  o Individual performance. Derek Jeter, Mariano Rivera

  o Individual accountability. Washington and the Cherry Tree.

  o Individual rights. “The Bill of Rights. “I have my rights!”

  o W/o concomitant obligations. We have no public service requirement of our citizens.

In sum, we assume it to be the community’s job to support and advance the individual, not the other way around.

Moreover, and as mentioned, we know that the community through its institutions can be oppressive. So we take special care to protect against this. This is what the bill of rights in all about.

- Barriers to my idea of community arise from transformative world and national trends.
My grandma Bessie used to pass time looking out her third storey window on Wilmohr Street in Brooklyn. Watching the street. Looking outward. In doing so she performed a community service. She contributed to public safety. Then she got a T.V., and turned inward. Away from the community and unknowingly, from service. And think of the gizmos and gadgets for personal amusement that she did not have in 1949.

I used to go the library, a shared space, one of our sacred spaces, to look things up. Now I sit at my computer, in my office, by myself.

Two wage earners, two jobs, maybe both, are needed these days to pay a family’s bills. Leaving a lot less time and energy for the ambulance corps. Or the fire department. Or the planning board. Out in our community.

- Also, remember the many uses of the word “community.” These are cross cutting, and nested. Even within my definition, in this place, interacting face to face, each of us may be in several or more. The synagogue. People living on Prospect street. The county. The village. The town. The school district. This perhaps forces us to choose which one is most important in at a particular moment.

Some of these developments we can do little about, especially locally. They are conditions of our modern lives. But if we understand community, and are committed to the idea of community that I have sketched out here for you tonight, there are some things we can do something about.

- What are they?

- The way we think about things. When I became interim dean in 1996, I instantly came to be regarded as a “member of the administration.” I had been working in the New Paltz Faculty since 1968, so almost 30 years. I had been faculty presiding officer. But colleagues no longer regarded me as member of the faculty. Sometimes in an effort to be kind a long term friend would say – “the administration, but of course, not you.”

I am tempted, but Let me take the high road and avoid being explicit about the invidious analogy.
Of course, it was me. I was both in the faculty and in the administration. That is a major element of the challenge in the dean’s job. Being both. But the predisposition was to the adversarial definition of the relationship, not the communal one, and not just on the faculty side.

This was evident most recently in our management of the fiscal crisis we faced over the past several years. Roles and responsibilities sometimes require us to adopt clashing perspectives. But adhering to the adversarial assumption alone, without remembering that we are a single community with a common interest, both denies and destroys that community.

- The way we organize things. Let’s take an off campus example. We have a school district. A village. A town. All in the same place. These governing structures work against community. They encourage conflicting perspectives and conflicting interests that might not be present if all these jurisdictions did not exist. They discourage identifying a single community interest. By their very existence, they prevent the identification of a single venue in which differences may be resolved.

Differences of role, interests and priorities assure that conflict will arise out of the unavoidable overlapping of differently defined communities; we add to these when we structure in new reasons for conflict.

It does not have to be this way. (Look at Connecticut, just next door.) We cannot fix all that is broken about local government in New York. But we can fix what is in our hands to fix, or fail to do so, and diminish our community.

- The way we talk about things. Our college is a distinct organization. It is local, but it is also regional and sometimes statewide, or national or international in its reach. It is a part of the community – but apart from the community. Which will we stress? What is our premise? Do we on the campus take ownership – is New Paltz the community or our community. Do we think regularly and concretely and in a priority way about contributing to community here?
This is different than proving how important we are for the community. We are. But we if we want to be integral in our community, we must be more than a captive industry, justifying itself.

And for residents, the same question. Early in my time here, as I taught and studied local government, and then got involved, I learned that there were people in town – holding elective office – who never came up on our college campus. That’s right: never. It was big, and alien and unknown. Full of people from somewhere else.

Is our college an external imposition present in our midst – a source of issues and irritants - or an integral defining element of our community?

Of course, from each perspective, it is both. But in the imperatives of the moment – water charges, police costs, fire calls - the communal perspective is too often subordinated. It becomes them and us. They are the problem. They should fix it. Not us together. We have a problem. Let’s find a solution together.

Indulge me in an example that makes the point from both perspectives. I have lived in town for forty-three years. Always could afford a place that allowed me to walk to work, or come back to campus after dinner. For years now I’ve troubled by the number of our faculty who have not been able to afford homes in New Paltz, and who have purchased else were, in Kingston, in Ellenville, in Poughkeepsie. It seems that half our history department now lives in Kingston. This was not the case in 1968.

Of course, these places, where my colleagues live, will be where they volunteer. Will we in the town, village and school district notice this “dog that does not bark?”, to take a page from Sherlock Holmes? Perhaps not.

But remember also that after work, these colleagues go home, to dinner and family. Will they come back for an evening lecture, or to bring their kids to a varsity ball game? Probably not. Too far. Too late coming back home.
So community in New Paltz, on campus, in the town and village, is diminished in several ways.

We can hope for the local real estate market to decline further. Not my preferred solution. Or we can help develop affordable housing so that new faculty may live locally. We on campus have been trying to address this – and find ways build housing for new, younger faculty and graduate students, and in doing so build community.

Perspectives differ. Opposition rises. What will be the impact on traffic of the housing we’d like to encourage? What about the already excessive burden on property taxes? What is the cost/benefit - tax revenues vs. demand for services?

So we face a multi-year adversarial process that uses scarce resources unproductively, … one that will produce winners and losers – or maybe just losers - and that will diminish our community. It is our normal way of doing business – the adversarial processes at the heart of government as usual. But shouldn’t a real community be able to find a better way?

Some Directions

- Placing community First: For our college, New Paltz is our community. For our town, village, school district, all our residents - our college is - ours. This is the premise upon which we must move forward.

- Language matters. Lately I have been helping with the revision of the Newburgh City charter. I’ve gone to a lot of meetings. I noticed that one member of the commission always takes ownership – She says “my city,” “our charter,” and not, “the city”, “the charter.” Her language reinforces the message that we are in it together. Not a bad thing. So how about “our college” not “the college” and “our community,” not “the community” and “our government.” You get it, I hope. “Us and us” not “us and them”, builds community.

- Create opportunities to do things all together.
Here I cite the One New Paltz/One Book Program. This is a genuine collaborative community event,

Collaboration on the bus loop is another example.

We have worked together for the enrichment of the community’s schools, the professional lives of teachers. Interestingly, this arose out of a perception that we were not doing well at this, and a mutual commitment to do better. Of course, we want to help all schools in our region, but New Paltz is our community.

In these hard times, I am encouraged by the collaborative opportunities identified to lower costs while maintaining service levels, inclusive of the College and all our community governments, in the recent Fairweather Associates report.

- A “how can I help attitude?” A former student just completed a successful career in the NYPD. He told me that volunteering in the NP fire department was a formative experience for him. There are ______ students living on campus. Community Volunteers are in short supply. Volunteer firemen. Volunteer ambulance corps drivers. Other schools both public and private provide a model. Volunteerism within our community, as part of the community, provides a chance of service and educational enrichment. Certainly perceptions on the demands placed by the need to respond on campus will change if some of those doing the responding are student members of our community. So will training opportunities hosted here.

Real communities are not utopias. They are marked by differences in values, priorities, perspectives. In fact, I would argue that such communities are enriched by diversity, by difference. Their strength lies not in the absence of conflict, but in a capacity to address the issues they face with the belief that there is there is a common good, and a commitment to seeking it.

The core lesson?: A persistent awareness of the value of community itself, and our stake in it, is essential to preserving and strengthening community well-being. To paraphrase Woodrow
Wilson, we must never risk destroying our community in our efforts to save it. Rather, as we address our issues together, self conscious of our community’s value and specialness to us all, we will in doing so assure New Paltz’s vitality and its long-term well being.

Please continue with me in this work.

Thank you.