Reflections on Building Community

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As a young American "spiritual seeker" in the early 1970s, I was intent on finding a way of life that would nourish my spirit even as I engaged with the larger society in an effort to redress some of the social ills I saw around me. Speaking out against that which I perceived to be wrong with my country had taught me that however impassioned, however sincere, even however "right" I might be, without something to keep my heart alive, I would inevitably be left sick with anger. So it was that Allah prepared me to embrace His deen when led to it. It was very clear that I had been plucked from the edge of an abyss, and that safety was found in the community.

> *And hold fast, all of you together, to the cable of Allah, and do not separate. And remember Allah's favor unto you: How ye were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that ye became as brothers by His grace; and (how) ye were upon the brink of an abyss of fire, and He did save you from it. Thus Allah maketh clear His revelations unto you, that haply ye may be guided,* (Qur'an: Ahli' Imraan, Ayat #103)

A strong theme running through the deen of Islam as I encountered it was the importance of community. Prayers are considered more blessed when they take place in congregation. There are plentiful *ahadith* about eating in company, assembling for the remembrance of Allah, treatment of neighbors, the mutual supportiveness of believers, etc. Islam is a *deen* that is explicitly social. The importance of community is everywhere reinforced in the practice of Islam. At the same time, it doesn't take long before one becomes aware of Muslims' complaints about the *ummah*. There is much concern about the deterioration of community among the non-Muslims as well.

The intention of this essay is to explore the notion of community and some of the contemporary thought concerning the plight of community today and how it may be addressed. Central to this discussion is the relational aspect of community. Relationships among people are at the core of community. The essay begins with the concept of community and its psychological importance. Next comes consideration of the social value of community and the way this value has been affected by the commodification of values and social saturation. The essay concludes with an introduction of the concept of social capital and its relevance for the Muslim community.

The Concept of Community

For those of us with a Western education, modern usage and the contemporary sense of the term's meaning have heavily influenced our concept of community. The term comes from the "Latin communitas, a community, fellowship, from communis, common. [1]" Our general sense of the term may be parsed into two ideas. First of all, the term refers to a group, and secondly to shared attributes or something the group has in common. When we think of community, there are various descriptive and historical aspects that come to mind. Generally the term has some sense of locale, of people joined together for a common pursuit. We think of community as referring to a collective of private and public affiliation that is informal, rather than formal

institutional organization. We think of the term as referring to entities that extend outward in general groupings from the individual. That is, we recognize that an individual may belong to more than one community, even though our sense of the meaning of the term may shift slightly depending on what kind of community we are talking about. Each of the "communities" to which we belong is characterized by the attributes we hold in common with other members of that particular community. The members of a particular community positively value a commonality that allows the members to consider themselves a community. What members of a community often strongly defend and highly prize is the unifying sameness of community identity and sameness.

We recognize that community places certain limits on our behavior, and even upon our identity. That is to say that to be a part of a community necessarily entails that we make choices not only on the basis of what is good for us, but what is good for the community as a whole. But there is another element to our identity, that of individual characteristics and choice. We have a strong sense of individual responsibility and choice. This sense of responsibility and choice entail a belief in autonomy, the freedom to make a choice and to take responsibility for that choice. In the West, individualism, autonomy, and choice are deeply embedded aspects of liberal democratic ideology. Among the Muslims too, the sense of individual choice and responsibility goes to the core of identity. The reward of the Garden and the punishment of the Fire are incomprehensible unless we accept that humans have the freedom to make individual choice. As Muslims we also have an embracing sense of *Tawhid*, by which the choices we make are already known by God. The relation between free will and pre-destination is a discussion well beyond the limited scope of this essay. What is important to this discussion is the recognition of the importance of individual choice. Westerners and Muslims alike have a utilitarian sense of social justice by which our highly prized freedom of choice is constrained by our responsibility to the community.

The pivotal point is that at the same time we value community, we also value the individual. There is an inherent contradiction here: a mutually beneficial association based on sameness is to arise out of the free choice of individuals, each of whom is different from the others. (Stone, 1992) This inherent contradiction creates a tension in us. On the one hand, there is that which we believe everyone in our community holds in common. If we see someone behaving in a way that calls into question this belief of ours, we may get upset. We may decide their behavior indicates someone is not a "real" Muslim, or is a "bad Muslim." Or we may decide, "If that is how Muslims behave, I will distance myself from them." On the other hand, there is that which we believe falls in the realm of our individual choice. If someone says something to us that calls into question this belief of ours, we may get upset. We may feel the other person is unduly harsh, or that they think we are a "bad Muslim." Or we may decide, "If that is how Muslims are going to treat me, I will distance myself from them." Or, we may quietly acquiesce to the situation in either case, and hold our distress within. Each of these possible responses to the tension between the ways we are like other Muslims and the ways we are different militates against the formation of a strong community.

The desire to be part of community, to belong to something larger than ourselves, runs deep within the human being. Alfred Adler (1870 - 1937), for a time a colleague of Freud, rejected the psychoanalytic "drive" theory, and gave primacy to the desire to be part of the whole as the

foundation of his psychological theory. The German word Gemeinschaftsgefuhl means feeling of community, of belonging. For Adlerian psychologists this feeling of connectedness is both the index and goal of mental health.

This notion has intuitive appeal to us as Muslims. For the infant, connection to mother is a matter of survival. As the infant needs the umm, the Muslim needs the *umma*. And yet, as Abdelwahab Meddeb points out in The Malady of Islam (Meddeb, 2003), "The Islamic World has been unceasingly inconsolable in its destitution." Among the Muslims, considerable effort has been expended to understand the current plight of our community. This essay does not deal with the historical malaise of the Muslim Umma. Instead, this essay considers challenges to community that arise from the nature of the dominant society in which we live. These challenges affect all efforts at building and sustaining community that take place within our society, not just those made by Muslims.

Here in the United States, the national optimism De Tocqueville first remarked upon can now be found among many of the Muslims of America, exerting themselves to develop the Muslim Community in the United States. The 41st Annual ISNA convention was organized around the theme of "Dialogue, Devotion, and Development." It may be that increased awareness of the way in which the dominant society's organization places impediments on the development of vital communities may help to focus our efforts at community development. Without critical understanding, we may find that we are building only a simulacrum of community, that our work is producing a kind of "Islam Lite" rather than a community of Muslims full of the light of Islam.

The Value of Community

On the social, as distinct from the psychological level, community is valued for many reasons. It is through community that we have meaningful personal relations due to commonalties like ethnicity, language, and geographic area. Community brings with it a sense of common history, values, concerns, projects, mutual interests and obligations. Genuine community entails commitment to mutual welfare and acknowledgment of interdependence. Genuine community carries with it a sense of obligation and responsibility. Albert Hirschman has written a book called Exit, Voice, and Loyalty (Hirschman, 1970) in which he suggests that when things are not as we want them to be there are two general kinds of responses we may make. The first he calls exit. This is the characteristic response we make when, for example we don't like the service or food in a restaurant -- we stop going there. If some item we regularly purchase gets too expensive we may switch to an alternative. If we don't like our job, we may look for another. This is one of the advantages of free market choice, we are given the opportunity to express our displeasure by exit.

But in the domain of social relations, to exit when we don't like what's going on is generally only the choice of last resort. The Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, made Hijra only after years of effort to call the Quraish to Islam. If there is a problem between friends, we typically give voice to the problem and try to bring about change in this way. If something about our community bothers us, we will tend to voice our displeasure and attempt to change it. It is reprehensible to treat people as though they were simply objects we can simply abandon when

they no longer please us. In this way, social relations are not like the relations between customer and product. Today, however, our viewpoint is powerfully influenced by market forces (see Schwartz, 1994), and we may find that we treat our local masjid like it was simply another location in the market place, like restaurants, cinemas, shopping malls, hairdressing salons, etc. It starts to feel perfectly natural just to exit, to stop going to the mosque or look for another when something displeases us. The mosque becomes simply another object we can abandon when it no longer pleases us. For a closer look at how this happens, see Imam Zaid Shakir's article, Flight from the Masjid (Shakir, 2003). This choice to exit the focal point of our local Muslim community can easily happen even if the time we spend there when we do go is rewarding. There are so many claims on our time that we are forced to prioritize ? and waiting around twenty minutes after the adhan for asr just may not make it to the top of our list.

Part of what we are seeing here is an effect of the society we live in. After all, "time is money." Unfortunately, living as we do in a technological system, all human behaviors are subject to the atomizing effects of the system, and reduced in the end to economic functions. This statement may not be intuitively obvious. For a powerful and comprehensive analysis of the totalizing narrative that comprises the technological system, see the work of Jacques Ellul. (Ellul's books on the subject include The Technological Society, 1964; The Technological System, 1980; and The Technological Bluff, 1990). As the drive for efficiency becomes dominant, social relations and institutions are threatened, including of course, community.

Today when we assign value to community, generally the kind of value we ascribe is spiritual, emotional or cultural. This makes community a value subject to lip service but for which real effort tends not to be expended. This takes places because in a technological system it is difficult to see what is gained by being part of community. The question is whether community has a value that is practical or economic. If community does not have practical or economic value it is of no value to a technological system. If "community values" are to be preserved simply for emotional or spiritual reasons, they will tend to be transformed over time to versions of these values that have economic function.

Consider the way that traditional communities made use of social gatherings. In a close-knit community the social interaction of community members provided entertainment for its members. The stories people tell each other relate to their community and contain instruction about the way of life that the community embraces. As a young Muslim, I recall entering a clearing in a date grove in Tunisia after Maghrib to find the men of the village seated close to one another, reciting Qur'an in unison in the moonlight. The gathering was aesthetically beautiful, emotionally moving, and spiritually uplifting. It was a beautiful celebration of common values that served to instruct, to reinforce community solidarity, and to provide a venue for social interaction. Think of the staying power and value in our vast body of Qasa'id and poetry like al-Busayri's al Burda, Rumi's Mathnawi, and the work of Hafiz and Iqbal. The social interaction in our traditional communities around song and poetry provided the Gemeinschaftsgefuhl, the feeling of community so important to the Adlerian psychologists. It provided instruction and entertainment, and it did so, by and large, with minimal economic cost. In fact, one of the hallmarks of traditional community is that life does not require cash to be a part of all social transactions.

This is another way of saying that traditional community is not dependent on a market economy. The community itself is an economy. The essayist Wendell Berry has written about such communities (Berry, 1987). Many of the economic assets of such communities were largely intangible. The culture of the community carried knowledge, attitudes and skills. It supported family and community coherence and depended on family and community labor. It had built into it respect for the bounty of the natural world and the majesty of the Creator. Character was built upon the shared wisdom of the community itself. These communities had economies that were enacted for the most part without being inscribed in the ledgers of accountants.

The line of thinking being pursued here invites objections based on the impossibility of "turning back the clock." However, is the very ease with which the phrase turning back the clock comes into mind is itself a symptom. The phrase is an example of the extent to which people living in a technological system develop a world view that is thoroughly dominated by technical, and as in this case, even mechanical metaphors. For a light read that looks at the way our notion of time has been transformed by technology, see Jeremy Rifkin's Time Wars (Rifkin, 1987).

The Commodification of Community Values

In a technological society, stories and songs and instruction become separated from one another, and each performs an economic function. Instruction is split off as a separate educational function, stories are split off as another industry (TV, movies), and singing and music as still another industry. Each becomes an economic function: paid teachers and private schools, movies and TV for stories, professional musicians who are part of a vast industry that sculpts and markets their music. However, as economic functions, the value content of education, stories, and music shift. Public schools have to fight for the tax dollars to keep them afloat, and to justify the expenditure of these dollars in economic terms. The stories we see on television or in movies are subject to a highly complex set of factors that shape what finally ends up on the screen. The music we consume is similarly shaped by its economic function. Inevitably, the forces of the market place reduce the values of the stories and songs to the lowest common denominators, and within the United States that means sex and violence. George Lucas portrayed this in a film he made as a student: THX1138 (Lucas, 1971). The film portrays a highly technical future society. Though not part of the plot line, Lucas' vision of future TV was telling: there are three television channels, one shows nothing but graphic violence, one shows nothing but pornography, and one shows nothing but stand-up comedy.

The process of atomization of the value of community into specialized roles that can be commodified extends well beyond education or entertainment. In our society, as much as 90% of the workforce is employed providing what may broadly be understood to be services. In order for the growing ranks of professional service providers to have work, there must be a growing number of identified "needs" to be serviced. As Big Oil needs crude, the service economy needs human problems. John McKnight argues that ?The basic issue is professionalism itself, which is dependent upon the manufacture of need and the definition of new deficiencies.? (McKnight, 1996) As more and more professionals are around to service this proliferation of commodified needs, there is less reason for the members of a community to care for each other. "Why cook a meal for the elderly widow next door, Meals-on-Wheels has got it covered." Community values

of caring for each other are inevitably eroded, because the provision of services can never equal the provision of caring. This is not to say that professionals don't care. But caring professionals work through institutions that deliver "care," and that care is carefully delimited by economic and organizational realities as well as scope-of-practice concerns.

The transformation of all value into economic value can take place even with our spiritual values. How many of us have strolled through the bazaar at the ISNA convention, for example, buying books or other products of which, in the end, we make very little use? We are attempting to consume Islam. Nor is this spiritual materialism (Trumpa, 2002) confined to products. We can be consumers of experiences as well. This can take place in quite subtle ways, or it may be as obvious as feeling "Islamic" after we've been to the ISNA convention as we return to a daily life saturated by interactions with the marketplace in one form or another.

Social Saturation and Community

Social saturation is a term used to refer to the proliferation of relationships. It refers both to face-to-face relationships and mediated relationships. Mediated relationships include those conducted through the telephone, email, correspondence, as well as relationships to media figures, authors, characters on television shows or in books, musical groups, etc. The concept is that with all the technologies of communications available to us, the numbers, varieties, and intensities of relationship increasingly fill our days. Our notion of self becomes populated with partial scripts arising from all these different relationships. The difficulties this can cause for our sense of our self as Muslims have been discussed elsewhere (Coburn, 2003). Here we are turning our attention to how social saturation affects our community. In doing so, we will be following the argument of Kenneth Gergen in his 1991 book, The Saturated Self.

The question here is not whether communities of mutually supportive individuals can sustain traditions they value. The question is whether communities of mutually supportive individuals can be sustained. Consider the effect of transportation technology: social mobility is increased, leading to families in continuous motion from one environment or job setting to another, and creating what Vance Packard has called a nation of strangers. (Packard, 1972) This leads to a deterioration of community with which many of us are familiar, a community in which neighbors are strangers, and a multiplicity of very different ways of living prevail. Within these communities are groups that struggle to maintain their identity, picking their way through the streets, the institutions, and the recreational locations that make up the "community." Major segments of the American population try to live behind these invisible walls. But the separation between groups doesn't work very well because of the pervasive presence radio, television, newspaper, magazines, novels, films, etc. which all serve to create mass consciousness. The technology unites large numbers of people into audiences for public events like concerts, political rallies, sports events, etc. Under these conditions it is only natural that as the strange views and ways of life of others become increasingly familiar, one's own traditional commitments gradually turn strange. Meanwhile, the "community" created by the developer so carefully to integrate schools, shopping, parks, homes, and so on is full of empty houses, a "bedroom community," in which people are seldom home.

Developing out of this, and facilitated by the very modes of communication that create the fragmentation of face-to-face community in the first place are communities linked mostly be words, images, and information shared primarily through electronic means. These "symbolic communities" do link people together and contribute to the kind of interdependence we recognize as constituting an important aspect of community. But with each new opportunity for electronic connection, the ties to location and face-to-face community of the traditional kind are weakened. The proliferation of electronic connections allows us to belong to many "virtual" communities, and changes the character of our relationships and our commitments. Jeremy Rifkin in his book Time Wars has remarked on the way the skills of social interaction tend to deteriorate as computer use increases. We become used to instant response, our interactions fragment as we become "multi-tasking."

Building Muslim Community

This narrative concerning the processes of social saturation and the commodification of needs can be understood as a story about how, as the number of our relationships grow, the richness of connection that exists within these relationships becomes attenuated. As the richness of connection in our relationships diminishes, our sense of belonging, of Gemeinschaftsgefuhl, is lost. How can we address these challenges as we seek to build a Muslim Community in North America?

Relationships among people are at the core of community. Building a strong community is based on building strong relationships. Strong relationships are characterized by richness of connection. Commodification of needs and social saturation tend to render our relationships one-dimensional. Many of the situations in which we find the behavior of another Muslim upsetting, or another Muslim finds our behavior upsetting, arise from the poverty of the connection between us. Let me give you an example that arose during workshops on consensus-building run by Dar al Islam, the Muslim organization for which I work. As an exercise during the workshop, we had a group of community leaders from different organizations in a major metropolitan area talk about how they felt Muslims in America should be involved with politics. There was quite a diversity of views: from the participant who felt that to register to vote was haram, to the participant who was engaged in the process of running for public office. These views were held passionately, and in a short time, the discussion became heated. We allowed this to continue for a bit, then stopped the discussion and introduced a second element to the discussion. This time, instead of talking about the position they held on the issue, participants were to talk about what life experiences had shaped to the position they held. The change in the discussion was dramatic. The participant who felt that to register to vote was haram talked about his minority status and the way government authorities in the bureaucracies and in the criminal justice system abused him and his people. The participant who was running for office talked about what it was like to live in a society where one could have no say in government and there was little to no opportunity to redress governmental wrongs. The two participants did not change their positions on the issue. They did, however gain respect for the authenticity with which the other participant held their position. This moved the participants to a place where each could validate the authenticity of the position of the other. By talking about their experiences around the topic under discussion, the relationship between the two participants was enriched. Their

understanding of each other's experience increased the value of their relationship, and allowed them to place this value ahead of their differences about political participation. The bond of brotherhood between the two was strengthened.

This example speaks to the nature of unity in our community. We are arguably the most diverse Muslim community on earth. We have Muslims from all over the globe in North America. We are going to hold different positions on almost any topic one can imagine. But unity is not uniformity. To the extent that our relationships with each other are multi-dimensional, rich connections, our ability to privilege what we hold in common above our differences will be increased.

The Concept of Social Capital

The example from the workshop serves also to illustrate an important concept currently used by those thinking about ways to revitalize community. The concept is "social capital." The first round emphasized the positions people held, and arguments were presented in political or intellectual or religious terms. The second round of discussion used a narrative approach, encouraging people to tell their personal stories. This way of speaking allowed participants to connect with each other on a personal basis, and so increased social capital among the group. Among other definitions, this succinct one from Cohen and Prusak is apt: "Social capital consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible." (Cohen and Prusak 2001: 4) Social capital works to ameliorate the tragedy of the commons: People often might be better off if they cooperate, each taking a fair share of the work. But each individual benefits more by shirking their responsibility, hoping that others will do the work. Social capital builds trust and trustworthiness. A third way it works is by widening our awareness of the ways in which our fates are linked.

While a thorough exposition of the concept is beyond this essay, and while use of the term "capital" carries a risk of enfolding the discussion in the larger discourse of commodification to which objections have been made above, the research on social capital seems clearly relevant to our task in building Muslim community. The term has become a focus of research and policy discussion with the work of Robert Putnam. See especially Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community (2000), described in the Washington Post as "the de Tocqueville of our generation." For an introduction to the concept online, check out The Encyclopedia of Informal Education's entry at http://www.infed.org/biblio/social_capital.htm.

The idea that civil society is built upon the complex web of personal relations among its members is one wholly in consonance with Muslim society. See, for example, Lawrence Rosen's "The circle of Beneficence" in his The Culture of Islam: Changing aspects of contemporary Muslim life (2002). Rosen writes about the importance of the negotiated ties of interdependency among people as the glue that holds Moroccan society together, and how political and technological factors interfere with these ties and spread corruption and social chaos (his translation of fitna). Key to the process of building social capital is the connective strategies by which people enrich their relations with each other. Such strategies rely on personal

narratives. Storytelling turns out to be a crucial technique for building social capital in part because it is a way of recognizing people's interests and needs, not simply their ideals. In Better Together: Restoring the American Community (2003), authors Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen use case studies from across the United States to illustrate how organizing action on methods that emphasize the creation of social capital can have remarkable results in many different aspects of community life.

For the Muslim community, an approach to community development emphasizing the creation of social capital may be a preferred means of addressing our serious concerns with institutional stagnation, flight from the Islamic centers, atomization of community, and the discontent among youth Jeffrey Lang mentions in Losing My Religion: A Call for Help (2004).

If God
Invited you to a party
And said,

"Everyone
In the ballroom tonight
Will be My special
Guest,"

How would you then treat them
When you
Arrived?

Indeed, indeed!

And Hafiz knows
There is no one in this world

Who
Is not upon
His Jeweled Dance
Floor.

[1] Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, Second Edition, Jean L. McKechnie, Ed. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983.

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