

It Takes a Village
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My friends Senu and Agbeko were born and raised in Ghana before moving to Canada as teenagers, on their own, to attend high school and university here. At home in their village not so far outside of Ghana's capital, children have the run of the village, and Senu and Agbeko grew up playing not just with one another but with numerous other "siblings" and "cousins", calling adults in the village 'aunt' and 'uncle', and eating meals at whatever home they happened to be nearest when hungry.

Similarly, in Efe and Aka Pygmy cultures, "allo-parenting" (care from non-biological parents) is common, starting within minutes of birth when a newborn is passed around the campfire — sung to, cooed at, and comforted by everyone in the circle. On average, Aka and Eke babies are passed between different adults 8 times per hour, and have an average of 8 and 14 primary caregivers, respectively, on any given day.¹

Not so in Canada. Here, infants usually have one or two primary caregivers at a time, with occasional other supports in their early days and months. After that first year of parental leave, generous by some western standards, most of our little ones spend the majority of their daytime hours in daycare with paid caregivers and many other kids of similar age, which may be a sort of village, but not quite the same as Senu and Agbeko experienced in Ghana.

The saying goes "it takes a village to raise a child." Anthropologists have noted with some surprise the precocious development of social skills in children raised in a traditional village setting, hypothesizing that the richness of relationships with many adults may be the reason.²

But it isn't only the children who need a village: our modern cultural norm of siloed nuclear families places an incredible stress and burden on mothers and fathers, too, as well as other caregivers. Some of us are fortunate to have loving and helpful extended family nearby - grandparents and aunts and uncles, or good friends — and I know some of you are that blessing to your own children and grandchildren and parents. But most young families in Canada don't have close enough village relationships to let their children run free in the neighbourhood, trusting their adult neighbours to care for them as if they were their own. Stress and low-social supports increase the risk of loneliness and mental health challenges, including postpartum depression, for new parents.

¹ Jared Diamond. *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* p. 187-8.

² Jared Diamond. *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* p. 189-90.

Curtis and I have a beautiful extended village of beloved friends and family, including our Unitarian Universalist community. But ours is spread across the country (and the world). In the last 10 months, we have felt the village incarnate in a few distinct moments: at friends' weddings, when good friends were happy to wear our babe, sometimes for hours, while he slept; at the ministers meeting last week in Calgary, when he sat in the middle of our circle of professional development and collegiality, crawling this way and that way, held at meals so we could enjoy them without interruption, and alternately grinning and eating everyone's name tags; and, most often here, in this congregation, where we know he won't ever be without love and care or have the chance to get into things he shouldn't, at least not for long. The comfort and ease that these village moments give us is a treasured break in the intensity of parenting a wee one. I'm grateful that we are part of a faith community, one of the few remaining places of truly multigenerational community.

It takes a village to nurture a parent.

Susan Pinker, a Canadian psychologist, writes about the "village effect," and how in-person, mutually supportive relationships increase not just our sense of wellbeing but our physical and mental health, our social skills, our longevity, and even our gene expression. She gives a wide variety of tips and tools for creating and maintaining meaningful relationships.

In response to Pinker's book, Andrew Anthony writes of his father, who lived to almost 90, even after emergency surgery and an extended coma the day after he lost his wife 13 years earlier. Anthony assumed his father was quite isolated, with only their weekly family brunch on his schedule. But then, at his father's funeral, he was surprised by a huge crowd. It was only then that he learned from stories about all of his father's relationships. He says: "There was the Indian family from the nearby newsagents who turned up with a wealth of fond anecdotes about my dad. The Polish couple who ran the cafe along the road that he visited regularly. The family across the street who told me he was on first-name terms with all the local bus drivers, whom he'd learned to address in their native tongues. And there was also a large number of old friends and their children with whom he'd remained in close contact." After reading Pinker's book, he wondered if his father's relationships were the reason for his long life.

It takes a village to honour an elder.

On our honeymoon we travelled to a small town named Cloughjordan in Ireland to visit a renowned ecovillage. We booked our stay in the eco village hostel, but arrived to find our room had been double booked due to a wedding, with guests filling every available bed in the hostel and in the surrounding area. Fortunately, the hostel owner made a call and found us a bed just up the hill from the eco village with a couple who ran a B&B intermittently out of their home.

Disappointed to stay outside the eco village but grateful for a room, we headed to our

hosts. Once we settled in we went walking through Cloughjordan, finding a small grocer and a pizza slash Indian food joint where we were able to find some dinner.

Upon returning to the B&B, our hosts graciously invited us to join them in their living room.

And from them we learned a different history of Cloughjordan.

The eco village was renowned for its environmentalism and intentional community building, but our host, Seamus, who called it the Eco project not village, shared instead of the village of Cloughjordan. How the tiny town had a history of Protestant and Catholic strife, until Cloughjordan's Protestant Minister and Catholic Priest brought the town together with a shared choir. The legacy of peace and respect started decades ago remained til this day in the village; for example, we went with him to his Saturday morning sojourn at the local sports field, where all the families came together for their children to play hurling and camogie matches regardless of faith background, quite a feat for a rural Irish village. Everyone knows everyone, and the villagers had a lot of fun, as well as offering significant support to one another.

Seamus also told us of meeting a group from the Eco Project on the train platform one morning. He asked them where they were going, and they said "To Germany." He asked them what for, and they said - "for a conference." What is the conference about?, he asked, and was dismayed when they said "Community building."

Seamus didn't hold back: "There has been a community here for 400 years, he said." Why would they pay to go to Germany to learn about community building, without ever once asking the residents of Cloughjordan about their experiences?

In the end, we learned far more from Seamus and his wife Helen about hospitality and community than we did from our tour of the eco project. When we got a tour of the eco-project the next day, we were impressed with the beauty of the naturally-built houses, but did not feel a lot of the messy interconnectedness that makes up real community. In fact, our tour guide said that the three main causes of tension between eco village residents were the "3P's: "Pets (and pooping), parking, and parenting. And I knew that most of our experiences were closer to the community experience of the eco village than the surrounding village of Cloughjordan.

It takes a villager to know an eco village from an eco project.

One more story that I heard from a yoga teacher, a teacher of teachers, of two young men in his yoga community who died suddenly within a few months of each other: Both were beloved individuals, and both were fathers of young families. The first young man was part of the South Asian community, and when he died, everyone connected to the family gathered, and quickly sorted out who was going to provide food and transportation for the family, and make other arrangements, including paying the

mortgage on the family's house for several months until other arrangements could be made. He described being struck by how thorough the gathered community was in making sure the man's family was taken care of. More to the point, everyone treated this as if it were an entirely normal thing.

This was underscored when the second young man died. One of his yoga friends who was also part of the South Asian community, asked when everyone in the yoga community (mostly white anglophone Canadians) would be gathering to make sure his family was taken care of. The response was along the lines of, "Oh...I think the family is sorting that out."

It takes a village to support people in the midst of terrible loss.

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There's an old proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

As I reflect on the contrast between Ghana and Canada, Cloughjordan and the ecoproject, the South Asian community and yoga community, I can't help but see the connection between our loss of the village effect and how hard it has become to reach out for help and support when we need it.

A century ago, a church this size would likely draw from a very small village where we all knew each other. We wouldn't be able to pick and choose what to share in joys and sorrows - everyone would already know who was grieving and who was celebrating, who was dating whom, and who was struggling. We wouldn't get back in our cars (or our buses) and return home, only to see each other the next time we attend, a week or a month later. Summers wouldn't be time away from church, and we wouldn't call the caring team or minister when something significant happened in our lives... someone would just show up at the door with a casserole and an offer to share a cup of tea. Or perhaps even the mortgage payments for the next six months.

I have noticed that hard times can bring people closer; it can be the nudge that propels us from camaraderie to solidarity, from pleasant enjoyment of visits to messy sharing of lives. But most often, hard times mean further isolation, and people are more likely to fall away from community, from church, from friendships, than lean into them. The moments when we most need each other — during times of busyness, stress, fatigue, struggle, worry or profound grief — are the times when we are most likely to find it hard to reach out.

Brené Brown attests that the courage to be vulnerable is the hardest and most rewarding courage we can cultivate.

But it needs cultivation. Lots of regular practice, fumbling and stumbling and all. Like swimming, we would do well to practice lengths before crossing the pond or lake. The

hard moments in life are our water crossings, and the swim strokes of vulnerability and support are most likely to be there for us if we have built connections first in shallower waters.

This is a community of mutual support in our spiritual journeys and in our lives. UUCD is among the best congregations I know at giving support in hard times, and yet, we are still a far from a 24 hour a day, 7 day a week village most of the time. In our times of highest need, we can lean out, or we can lean in.

It takes all of us practicing vulnerability and mutual support for it to be safe for any of us to lean in.

We have the opportunity, the choice, to practice vulnerability. To practice villagehood. To become an even stronger village for one another. And, in a world full of isolation, silos, and messages of individualism and independence, to become interdependent villagers wherever we go. To embody the village in our very being.

For to live well, it takes a village. All of our lives.

My prayer today is for all of our children around the world, all of the mothers, and all of the fathers and elders and people who are hurting, sick, or lonely, that we might find one another in the village. A village to nurture a mother, honour an elder, to replenish a grandmother, to heal the wounded in body and spirit. A village to raise our children, that they might one day lead us to a better, more connected, more just world.

So may it be.

Amen.