

# WHAT CREATES A THRIVING COMMUNITY?

THE PULSE OF SPIRIT

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What creates a thriving community? That community could be a family, an organization, a town or a nation. What are the core principles and ideas that allow a community, of whatever kind, to thrive?

There is a fabulous interview of the British comedian Russell Brand. Upon being asked about his spirituality, he says, “Just be nice!”

Kindness in community is an essential factor. So I am interested in a conspiracy of kindness in the community where I live at Sunrise Ranch. It is a primal matter. And it is a simple matter: just be nice, be kind, and hold that as a value. Find a way to be kind in your exchanges with other people. That goes a long way to having a peaceful community.

That’s certainly better than a standard of meanness. I’ve been in some communities where you were a nobody unless you felt

free to take a bite out of someone else’s happiness anytime you felt like it. To me, that’s horrid. So I’m up for a conspiracy of kindness in my community.

But kindness alone doesn’t make a thriving community. There are issues of reality that intrude into any community and into any family. There has to be some kind of philosophy of how it works. Then there has to be the manifestation of that philosophy with integrity, and adjustment if it isn’t working.

When I think of Sunrise Ranch, I don’t think it will survive if all that is going on is niceness. When we are pulling weeds in the garden on a hot July afternoon, we need some organization. We need strength and motivation. It bothers me when we ask people to show up for a work party and nobody’s organizing it; people are standing around, wondering where the tools are and what the job is and who’s

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supposed to do what. So there's a need for intelligence in how we're functioning.

For any community, leadership is essential. Thirteen years ago, I had to face that necessity for Sunrise Ranch and for the global Emissary community. The community had devolved into chaos and conflict. There was a depletion of resources of all kinds.

With Jane Anetrini and others, I developed a call to action we called "A New Order of Leadership." Early in 2004, as we were developing it, Jane and I hiked at Wild Basin in the Rocky Mountains with our close friend Ruth Buckingham. I was attempting to figure out how we could create "A New Order of Leadership" without having to step forward myself as a leader. So while walking along the rushing water of St. Vrain Creek, Jane and Ruth looked at me and emphatically said, *You have to lead if we're going to do this. We can't ask everybody else to step up into leadership and not have you step up.* I protested: *Well, if that's what it's going to take, we're not going to do this.* In the heat of our conversation, I relented.

We were looking at a situation that was suffering from a lack of leadership. Martin Cecil, who had been a founding leader of the community, had died some years before, and his son, Michael Cecil—who was expected to take up the leadership—decided it wasn't for him. Community

members had left, and some who remained didn't care about our survival. Others were looking for our demise. And then there was also just plain old dysfunctionality—an inability to get along or get things done.

There is another disease of community which we were facing—an inward-looking, self-serving perspective. When any community limits its sense of mission to its own survival and contentment, it begins to die. That was one of the issues we were facing in 2004—people in our community who were living for the community itself and not for its mission. If you want to have a thriving community, it has to be for something larger than itself. Sunrise Ranch *is* for the people who live here, so we do look to be of service to each other. But Sunrise Ranch is in service to a larger reality and a larger world. We are here to be of service to the people who come for our *Full Self Emergence Program* and for many other programs. We are here to be of service to people around the world.

I've been speaking and writing recently about that dreaded word *hierarchy*. There are other more contemporary words, like *holarchy*, that seek to distinguish between human bureaucratic systems and the natural order of hierarchical systems in the rest of Creation. Whatever name you use, there is an order of things in the universe

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and in the natural world on earth that is structured in layered spheres of reality.

There are hierarchical structures in virtually all communities. Sometimes they are explicit, such as the organizational chart of a corporation. Sometimes they are implicit, such as the parents and grandparents of a family.

I've grown to be highly suspicious of people who are against hierarchy. Certainly, there are times to speak truth to power and to challenge the function of a human hierarchy, and I applaud the courage of people who do that when it is called for. But I've noticed that people who are railing at hierarchy are often up to no good. In my community experience, I've observed people who proclaimed their disdain for hierarchy, but who were actually seeking to discredit people who were offering leadership because they were eager to implement *their* hierarchy. It's not actually that they don't like hierarchy; they don't like *someone else's* hierarchy, and they want to substitute *their* hierarchy.

Anti-hierarchy protestations and behavior are especially dangerous in community when someone is imposing their will upon others but doesn't want to be accountable to anyone else in the hierarchy of their community. The truth is, the only hierarchy they like is their own. But they want you to pretend that they have no

hierarchy. They want you to be blind to the hierarchy that they are bringing.

On a national scale, that approach has been disastrous. That is what happened in the communist revolution led by Lenin. It upset the existing hierarchy, supposedly to serve "the people." By the end of Joseph Stalin's reign, there were twenty million people dead. All under the premise of a people's revolution. In Communist China the same thing was done. During the Cultural Revolution in the latter part of the 1960s, my brother-in-law's mother was dragged off into a labor camp and his father was imprisoned, simply because they were intellectuals. But Chairman Mao was leading a people's revolution.

We see similar contradictions on a different scale in nations today. Contemporary Western democracies are a far cry from the Soviet Union or Communist China but, in principle, there are similar issues when supposedly populist candidates elected into office end up doing something that is "for the people." And then we look at what they're actually doing and see that they are proposing that we strip healthcare coverage from a large proportion of the general populace and facilitate a transfer of the wealth of the country to an elite few. But they are against the hierarchy of the government. Actually, they want *their* hierarchy. They just don't like the hierarchy that's not theirs.

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The healthy function of leadership and hierarchical structures is a central element in the function of any community. That community could be a family, an organization, a town or a nation. Thinking of your community, how is it going? In my experience, the stress related to the function of hierarchy—or the lack of it—can prevent a community from being at peace.

Can you rest in your community? In your family, or nation? When you go to bed at night and put your head on your pillow, do you lie in the atmosphere of your community and think, “I’m at rest amidst all the wonderful people with whom I share my life”? Or is there something else? Is there an underlying turmoil? Do you feel under attack by the people in your community? Oftentimes, those issues revolve around dysfunctional hierarchical structures.

Over the years, there have been external attacks on my community; to some degree there still are. There are people who seek to impugn our reputation, who file legal suits, etc. I’ve had the dubious pleasure of fielding that and doing something about it, and being part of defending us legally and defending our reputation. It is not my favorite part of what I do. But we live in a world where all that goes on, and most organizations and communities of substantial size and longevity have to confront such things. But right within

whatever community we live in, don’t we want to create a situation where there is peace, so that we can put our head on our pillow at night and be in that peace? That does take a contribution from the heart and an understanding of the heart from each of us in community. Without that, I don’t know how there can be peace.

I’ve noticed that much of the unrest in community comes from dysfunctional hierarchical structures: a father who is vacant, a young person who has learned to distrust any authority figure, or a manager who is autocratic and uncaring. There are many manifestations of this one problem.

Dysfunctional hierarchy was certainly an issue we faced in 2004 at Sunrise Ranch. There were people with hardly any accountability to anyone, but who were nonetheless acting powerfully to disrupt any creative development that showed itself.

There were also people who just didn’t care about the mission of Sunrise Ranch, which is the spiritual regeneration of humankind. That’s why we’re here! That’s why I’m here. That’s why many of us are here. Even today, there are people who come to Sunrise Ranch who don’t care about that. They come into this context that is for that mission, and they’re against the hierarchy that is about that mission. But there are actually some of us here who are very intent and focused on our

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mission. We are dedicated to it. And we don't keep the mission of Sunrise Ranch a secret, either.

In a nation or a community, there can be a demand for a "welfare state." What does that look like in community? *This community should be serving me. Me, my money, my benefits.* The truth is that a community has to serve all the people who live in it. But not at the expense of the mission of the community. If the mission is neglected, it leads to the death of community, because truly noble, inspired people are interested in a noble and inspiring mission. So if a community ceases to be about its mission, all the people who *are* about that leave.

A thriving community has life because the people who are leading it are highly inspired themselves, and so they're attracting others who are highly inspired. And then together there can be a true community—a constellation of highly dedicated, committed, inspired people who are working together for the sake of mission. My experience of such people is that, for them, leadership issues are minimized; because if all concerned really care about what the mission is, and you are interested in being in integrity with that mission, it's so much easier to have clarity of view as to how we're relating together and what the right constellation is for the accomplishment of the mission that we're all dedicated to.

It is heartbreaking to see what's happening to the United States of America, where people of mixed motivations are introducing unclarity into the national conversation, to the point that the general populace doesn't know what's going on. The people of America are hearing so many lies, and they're seeing people in white shirts and suits, with good haircuts, standing before television cameras, with pomposity and arrogance, and with college degrees and a profession behind them, but speaking lies. And on the face of it, if you didn't have the time or the background or the interest to look into the context of what they're talking about, you wouldn't know that they are lying. They sound the same as the next person, who is actually telling the truth. And so the general populace is confused.

But *we* shouldn't be confused, not only about the national scene, but we shouldn't be confused being together in community. We don't have to live in confusion as human beings. When we do, we get adversarial with others, whether we see ourselves as a leader or not. Under those circumstances, life becomes a battle. And then when we go to put our head on our pillow, we're not lying down with a sense of the safety, the sweetness, and the atmosphere of love that we desire in the community.

Integrity of a community around its vision and mission, and around the way it is

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organizing itself to accomplish its mission, allows it to live. It allows community to be a party. It allows it to be loving and wonderful, joyous, creative. I'm here for that in my community. I'm here for a conspiracy of kindness and a conspiracy to allow the mission of my community to thrive and come all the way through into success and victory. Not a victory over anybody but the victory of giving the gift

that we have to give into the world, and the victory of enjoying each other and getting to live together in loving community.

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