

REAL COMMUNITY

by Antioch New England's
Laura Thomas

**"Whatever the problem, community is the answer."
- Margaret Wheatley**

I've always been a believer in the notion of "life lessons." There seems to be a set of lessons that are universal to the human experience and we seem to be presented over and over and over with opportunities to learn them. At the center of these seems to be the sometime counter-intuitive idea of community. In my work with schools- that least community oriented of community institutions- I feel this most keenly. The outreach for support and approval and affirmation simultaneous to the overwhelming desire to protect and privatize instructional practice is absolutely dizzying. It is ironic to discover over and over that, as Margaret Wheatley has said, "Whatever the problem, community is the answer," or as we say at the Antioch Center for School Renewal, within a community anything is possible. Without one, nothing is. That being said, it is also critical to our work as Antiochians.

There is universality in our oxymoronic instincts to hide as well as we can in order to protect ourselves, and to be found, to be seen, and to be known well. . Our clients, colleagues, neighbors and friends feel it just as intently as we, but it is our job as change agents to recognize and reject that instinct. We must reach out, through, around and behind the walls that we construct in order to re-create and renew the communities we need in order to survive and thrive.

This abstract idea has very practical implications and it is, at once, incredibly complex and terribly simple. In order to build community, we simply must be willing to engage with one another from a position of assumption of positive intent- a willingness to believe that the people around us are making their best efforts to do the right thing not just for themselves, but for us as well. In the Antioch community, where like-mindedness and respect are our hallmarks, this isn't a hard thing to expect or to enact. What about out

in the world? Out there where the diversity of thought and belief can create tension and frustration and anger and malice? What do we do when faced with what we most abhor, when those with whom we most disagree confront us? Do we draw back into the safe confines of our like-minded friends and colleagues? Do we seek the company of those who think like we do, vote the same way, eat the same food and pray (or not) to the same God (or absence thereof)? This is the measure of our real belief in the value of community. If we define community as "only those who think like me," then we are doing ourselves a grave disservice because the real circle of community is large enough for just about anyone- if we really know how to draw it.

A "real" community is one in which people truly listen. One in which people care about what other people think and feel and in which conversation isn't just "waiting for my turn to talk" or "waiting to explain to you why you're wrong/ misguided/ mistaken." A "real" community has space for anyone who is coming to it with real interest, with real passion, with real concern- even if the solutions we envision or the outcomes we seek aren't the same. In a "real" community, we address real problems in the real (albeit messy, difficult, crazy-making) world. In a real community, real things grow.

To build that type of community, we must specifically seek out those that we are most unlikely to want to find- those who disagree with us, those that we perceive as devaluing our work and our ideals. We must find in ourselves the courage to recognize the positive intent there as well. That can become downright terrifying to think about. If those we've always considered villains aren't - if they're actually mostly well intentioned folks who view the world differently than we do- then what do we **do** with them- and



with ourselves? How do we resist the temptation to show them the error of their ways, to correct the flaws in their logic, to fix them? From where can we draw the strength to just be- and to allow others to be equally- as travelers on the same road, but with different destinations?

In *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer talks about the idea of tying a rope between the house and the barn so that we can find our way home in a storm. As someone who grew up on a farm in Northwest Missouri, I certainly get the concept. I've stood in swirling snow, wondering which way I should walk. I've been grateful for a strong hand to guide me back and I've felt the deep sense of relief that comes from standing next to someone who knows the way. Within the Antioch community, I find many around me who will act as my rope- or who at least know where the rope is. At the same time, I also have to recognize that the rope I count on to lead me to a philosophical home, may not guide someone else as effectively because the home they seek is not the same as mine.

I guess that's the crux of community- especially the real, uncomfortable, challenging community in which we all grow. It requires a cognitive dissonance that we sometimes avoid. It needs a mix of elements in order for it to work. It has to have a bit of conflict, a bit of frustration, and a powerful commitment to stay at the table if it's going to work. It needs the people that we hope don't show up. It requires the people who think we're crazy- so long as they're willing to entertain the possibility that the crazy train runs both ways.

So how do we build it- particularly in this era of "love me, love my dog," unwavering,

whole-hog support for ideology- as- individual? How do we tease apart the person from the idea? How can I enjoy the sense of humor and commitment of an individual from the other side of the aisle- whatever that aisle demarcates? I wish I had a quick and easy 10-step plan to offer, but I don't. I think the only way to do it is to remember that we're dealing with people- unique, nutty, ever-changing people with the same fears and doubts and quirks that we have. When we view each other as people, rather than representatives of entire world views, I think we have more success in viewing the complexities that we each bring to the discussion. Alternatively, when we dig in our heels, claim the moral high ground and refuse to hear any perspectives but our own, we lose the opportunity to understand each other- and ourselves- more fully.

I think doing this requires a set of skills that needs to be cultivated. We may have to practice respectful, brave confrontation- the ability to question actions without questioning humanity. We may need to figure out how to confidently say "I don't know- but I want to figure it out with you rather than on my own." We may have to learn to put down our cynical idealism that requires us to believe the world is a mess and that we're the only ones who know how to fix it. I think that when we learn how to choose a stance marked by a calm, centered willingness to be Not Sure and Willing to Assume the Best and Brave Enough to Confront Respectfully, we may just find ourselves on the path towards real community.

Laura Thomas

is Director of Antioch University's Center for School Renewal and Core Faculty in the Department of Education. She has been a school change coach and staff developer for 10 years, following a career as a speech and theatre educator. She is affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools, the School Reform Initiative and is the Co-President of the New Hampshire affiliate of the National Staff Development Council. She is the author of multiple articles and currently writes for *The Critical Skills Classroom* (<http://antiochcriticalskills.wordpress.com/>). She lives in Keene, New Hampshire with her husband John and her two children Molly and Harry.