

# **Identity, Story, and Grace**

## **A Layered Approach to the Concept of Community**

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This paper reflects an unfolding effort at theory construction. As such, it is appropriate that I begin with a story that will give me something of a disclaimer. Last year I had the privilege of hearing Rod Stark make a presentation on secularization theory at a nearby college (Stark, 1998). Stark's central point was that the predictions of religion's demise made by the classical theorists of our discipline (particularly Durkheim and Marx) were well wide of the mark. Following his presentation, there were responses by a biblical scholar, a theologian, and a sociologist.

Two things stood out for me in this presentation and neither had anything to do with secularization. The first was an extended interchange (which continued after the session was over) between Rod and the resident sociologist. The heart of the interchange revolved around Rod's suggestion that sociologists spend too much time worrying about classical theorists and not enough time creating sociological theory. The young sociologist saw this as a departure from his identity as a sociologist and as a challenge to the method he preferred in raising the next generation of sociologists. As often happens in presentations by Rod Stark, it was the way that he raised his point as much as the point itself that formed the substance of their debate. Still, his point did get me thinking. How had I been thinking sociologically and what did my reflections on community have to do with theory construction?

What I have just given you is an overly long disclaimer about this paper and the project it reports. I am attempting to make connections of concepts and variables. Sometimes they draw on what we know of sociology. Other times I question my own loyalty to the discipline.

In other words, this paper is not a general reporting on what sociologists have meant by community over the last century. It is a very personal statement of how I think the world works. As such, it puts me in an incredibly vulnerable position, even with peers I have come to see each year for nearly two decades. I am vulnerable because you may not like what I say and I am very involved personally in these ideas. I am also vulnerable because you may like my paper to be supportive of me. This is too important to me to have you say "Nice Paper, John"; when we're done. I am in desperate need of your personal and professional engagement.

## **The Layers of Community**

This conference is about the Church of the Nazarene as community, suggesting that community is a broad secondary-group affiliation. It involves a group called ANSR

suggesting that community is found in common interest expressed in close proximity. It involves a story of a group of people who have met every spring for nearly 20 years, suggesting that community stretches across time in the telling and retelling of stories and the playing-out of rituals. It is a meeting that I find myself drawn to, because it has become a vital part of myself, suggesting that community is really something found inside the individual.

What I am attempting to do in this paper is to examine the theoretical components in each of these levels and try to demonstrate the connecting threads. This view suggests that community is experienced at each of these levels and that some of the same principles apply. Each builds on the one below it. I am going to start at the bottom layer and work my way up. For it is the individual component of community, the connection with identity that must be the beginning point.

**The Self and Community:** A symbolic interactionist approach to the self recognizes that the self is a social construction. Self is defined by the individual as an amalgam of parents, peers, and other socializing institutions. Mead says that this occurs through the use of language, gesture, and ritual. This suggests that even before a group of people has met as a part of community, the individual has both labeled and evaluated the concept of community as an ideal. M. Scott Peck, in his books on community, describes a quest he didn't know he was on until he first experienced it in a Friends school.

Why was Peck looking for community? Why do I? I want to suggest that what Mead recognized in the process of self-creation is that we cannot exist as unique atoms in a social environment. We need community, a framework for defining the self, as a means of identity. Just as Augustine's claimed there is a God-Shaped Hole in each heart, there is a need for community present in the individual. Later in the paper, as I attempt to examine the role of Grace in community building, I'll return to this point.

**Story and Community:** Daniel Taylor, in his wonderful book *The Healing Power of Stories* (1996) argues that story creates a minimalized community. He says that story involves a writer and a reader who each bring their unique individuality into interaction. He observes that when we read a good story, we don't just identify with a character but rather we move alongside the character.

When we repeat stories as part of a community, we reinforce those elements which defined the community in the first place. Again, there is a parallel argument offered by radical symbolic interactionism. Social structures, rather than existing a priori, are essentially recreated in every interaction. There must be a period of negotiation through which the parties can arrive at a common definition of terms, roles, and priorities. In frequent interactions, those negotiations happen in a few words. In occasional interactions, it is in ritual and story that we find ourselves.

Earlier, I referred to ANSR as a community that lives in story. From our opening ritual last night where we introduced ourselves (yet again) and discussed meaningful events from the past year to our remembering past conferences together the community is

reconstructed. To hear how Rich's year has gone reminds me of my interest in his life (if only yearly). To remember walking the plaza in the wee hours of the morning with Ron serves as a symbolic reminder of what ANSR is about.

My local congregation begins each service with a very informal time of prayer requests. The ushers take a microphone to members who share their joys and concerns. In those brief moments the congregation is re-established from the prior week. It is not simply the sharing of the concerns, but the voicing of the members that creates the community afresh. I say, "oh yes, Linda is concerned about Mary's surgery" or even, "why does Susan let her son have the microphone?". Either way, I am acknowledging the newfound reality of Linda, Susan, and Susan's son as members of the community.

At this meeting, we tell our stories and we play out our role as characters. How well do we do that? Well enough that I can tell you what kind of paper Ken is likely to prepare for a meeting two years from now and how that will be different from Ron's or Mike's. Why? Because the roles we play are negotiated and renegotiated so that there is continuity in plot and storyline. The community exists in the unfolding of that continuous story, even when it only unfolds two days at a time once each year.

Organizational Culture: Community can also be expressed in organizational culture. This meeting of ANSR began yesterday afternoon with a meeting of the Executive Board. There is a schedule of papers, committee assignments, data summaries, and joint meals that are the business of this group.

But underlying this group is a particular organizational culture, a way of accomplishing our tasks. It is a community-based orientation to our group that runs counter to more bureaucratic forms. In fact, our reliance on the ideas of story and identity described above have been far more important to this group. I used to wonder what the Executive Board discussed until I sat in and found that we discuss everything in open session that they talked about on Thursday! That simply serves as evidence of our identity as an organization.

The idea that organizations have cultures is a dominant theme in management literature and has made some consultants very wealthy. But not all organizations are equally supportive of the idea of community. Some are outright hostile.

A couple of years ago, I attempted to distinguish between organizational forms and their evidence of community. In some organizations there are actually forces acting in direct opposition to the creation of genuine community because they see the system as primary and individuals as mere cogs in a wheel.

In others, there is a sense of organizational ethos (think Intel or one of the dot.com companies). Individuals take pride in the group, but the group is primary. Community exists in an ambient form, but is generally unrecognized.

Other organizations see that there is some degree or providence present, some special task for the organization. Still, as Scott Peck (1993) describes, they can be too “polite” to allow true community to form. Such groups, in an attempt to control orthodoxy, struggle to provide their members with a sense of authenticity.

It is a rare organization in which a commitment to community exists as its driving ethos. It contains the intersection of organizational and personal mission, all mediated by Grace. I’ll say more about these components later in the paper.

My point in reviewing these images is that we can see that how we are organized and how we operate is a critical component in understanding the possible emergence of community. ANSR, as an organization, has a particular form of culture that is different than either the identities of its participants or the stories of their interactions.

Community and Culture: What does it mean for community to be expressed in a secondary–group relationship? How does one identify with Republicans or Rotarians? In what way does this reflect community?

I think one answer lies in reflecting on our knowledge of cultural anthropology. Every culture or subculture has a particular worldview comprised of its significant metaphors, heroes, and stories. Just as George Lucas drew on Joseph Campbell’s mythological treasure house to define the Star Wars ethos, every cultural group is involved in drawing out the defining characteristics of their world. These worldviews do matter in the life of the secondary group.

There is another approach to thinking about how large groups can be seen as community. Ten years ago, David Whitelaw and I (Hawthorne and Whitelaw, 1990) joined together in an exploration of the interactions of theology and sociology. We argued that there is a particular understanding of “covenant community” which has life in both disciplines. The whole idea of covenant suggests that there is an interdependence between the cultural group and some Other. One cannot view Old Testament history without recognizing that the covenant made between God and Abraham is the single defining story of the culture.

If we are to think about the Church of the Nazarene as a community, without reference to geography or interaction, then we have to think about how we form the critical elements of its worldview. There are specific defining theological characteristics, a particular history, and a rejection of worldliness. There are certain heroes who give it formation and substance. There are institutional structures that rely on that worldview.

But these issues, in any denomination, may be variable in nature. To the extent that the theological messages do not reflect the core issues, the power of the cultural community is weakened. To the extent that the historical identity has more to do with the modernist–fundamentalist fights of the early 20th century than Wesleyan holiness, the power of the cultural community is weakened. To the extent that the concerns over worldliness becomes focused on rules instead of principles, the power of the cultural community is weakened. And if the primary definition of the cultural community involves nothing

more than a set of buildings down the hill from here or a book series coming out of Beacon Hill press, there is little to signify the covenant expression of the community.

### **The Processes of Community**

In the first half of this paper, I have attempted to outline some of the considerations that exist in our varied uses of the concept of community I have suggested that there are layers of community. I now want to move to the ways in which the layers connect. I suggest that there are three themes that are present in every level: identity, story, and Grace. I want to examine each of these processes in some theoretical detail.

Identity: Earlier, I referred to George Herbert Mead's approach to the self. Initially I was attempting to make a simple point that self forms in interaction and that community is therefore internalized.

What I want to explore now is a more expanded idea of the process of identity formation. It begins with a theological conception of creation and calling. I use creation as a starting point because it relates to the unique qualities of an individual.

Unfortunately, we often think of creation as something that happened "in the beginning". David Whitelaw told me that the early church father Irenaeus claimed that the God of Redemption and Resurrection is also the God of Creation. The implication is one of an eternally present God performing creative acts. This moment is a new creation and in me, right now, "all things are become new".

I want to suggest that this notion of an unfolding creation is analogous to the theoretical framework used by radical symbolic interactionists and phenomenologists. In such a framework, every interaction must be progressively redefined. We gather at a meeting and find that we must adjust our views of reality toward each other. Until we come to a common "definition of the situation", expectations are unclear and behaviors uncertain. The reality experiments of phenomenologists are designed to underscore the "taken for granted" nature of interaction.

What does this mean for layers of community? For one thing, it means that the identity of the individual is a key element in our discussion. Roles, structures, classes are significant sociological concepts but they do not define the individual. It is only as these roles, structures, or classes are given meaning by the individual and used as part of the self-identification process that they gain their power.

Another implication of this view of identity is that community is formed through the recognition of the individual. It is as the individual gives meaning to and finds meaning from some larger group that community exists. If the individual is unable to bring the group into his or her identity, interaction within the group will be governed by external roles and expectations. When the individual is allowed the freedom to be that unique creation, community is possible.

An example of this paradox might help. All of us have had the experience of classroom teaching or pulpit preaching. There exists a natural tendency to want to play a role, to look like a professor or preacher. But it is when we risk being known for who we really are that true communication can happen. There is a fear of being rejected, but it is when we refuse to “be the fear” (Palmer, 1998) that community is found.

In the smallest groups, we look for “kindred spirits” (Taylor, 2000). In other words, we want to know that we have authentically been in relationship. In larger groups, like sociological organizations, we want to be seen as who we really are. Professional identity is important, but only when it rings true (this is why Stark is easy to listen to &#x2013; he seems arrogant, but he is expressing who he is).

In a congregational group, we are still looking to be known. More than having a church with the right programs, the right ministers, or the right kind of music, we look for a church that “feels like home”. This suggests that community exists because I can be myself in that place.

The Church of the Nazarene, or any other denomination, exists as a community precisely to the extent that it allows people to be truly themselves. If people feel that they can be honest about who they are and still be accepted, then community is possible. This, as I understand it, is one of the greatest messages of both Wesley’s preaching and the doctrine of entire sanctification.

Story: If identity refers to who I am in creation in this moment, story is the description of what happens when other identities are introduced in comparison. This may be a comparison of my identity today compared to my identity at ANSR III (even though I must recognize that I am reconstructing the past identity in light of intervening events). It may more likely be a situation in which the present identities of different people intersect. It may even be a larger saga in which we play a part.

As an individual, I was born into a story. The plot was already moving and in real ways the actions of past generations shaped and influenced choices I have made and continue to make. Who I am is defined by elements of that story. Whether the story was happy or sad, there is an impact to the story.

When I taught theory, I argued that this is what Marx meant when he stated that “social class determines life chances”. I used to refer to this as the trajectory of one’s life. It doesn’t mean that the story is deterministic, but it also doesn’t mean that the story is irrelevant. It impacts the probabilities of who we are and how we live.

When you and I enter into story together, we accept the fact that we will impact each other. Perhaps this impact is not as great as family of origin, but it is still real. For good or for ill, I will be different because we interacted.

One of my favorite stories (in fact it serves as something of a prototype myth for me) is the plot for Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey is given the gift of seeing

how he has impacted the world, to find how the world would be if he had not been born. Through his experiences, he learns through his guardian angel that “one man touches many lives”.

A parallel story could be told about the banker, Mr. Potter (although it would not make such an inspiring Christmas tradition). His greed, his need for control, his thirst for power all harmed the people who interacted with him or his institution.

This is my point. If Mead and Cooley are correct and we learn about ourselves through interaction, then the intersection of characters is critically important. If Anthony Giddens is correct in arguing that social structures are built out of repetition and emergent definition, it is story that provides the building materials.

A community is any number of people who have entered into this building process together. And just as a book changes with the coming or going of a particular character, so a community is changed (however imperceptibly) when a new member arrives or one departs. Their individual trajectories intersect for a period of time, which brings them into interdependence.

I think that a community also needs a sense of plot. Where is it that these characters are going? What provides direction? Walter Wangerin’s allegorical fantasy, *The Book of the Dun Cow* (1978) shows what happens when a group of animals discover their real reason for being. The community becomes far more than an organizational structure or a common geographical entity. It becomes a unit of action.

A local congregation has the potential for achieving community as it recognizes the story going on within it. This requires attentiveness to subtle shifts in the plot line of the church and the choices the characters really have. It is a celebration of tradition, experience, and reason that allows the church to move forward.

An organizational group like ANSR also needs an awareness of story. This is not just the repetition of past events. It is the clear identification of direction. Frankly, uncertainties about the significant role the organization plays, its future organizational structure, and its ability to assimilate new characters into its story inhibit its potential from having the kind of impact a true community would have.

For the Church of the Nazarene to be a denominational community, it must commit to story. This would involve recognition of the plot line of each member or attender within its doors or on its rolls. Or at least there needs to be a broad narrative articulated that allows those individuals to fit their stories into. This is a real challenge. It means that the story of the denominational community is not one of leadership, or pastors, or growing churches. All stories must be relevant if community is to thrive.

Grace: The third general theme that cuts across the various levels of community is grace. There are many possible definitions of grace that could be offered. I think of it as the

surprise that comes when the Divine intersects with the trajectory of my life. I resonate with the words of Philip Yancey, in *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (1997):

Grace comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it and I am one of those people. Now I am trying in my own small way to pipe the tune of grace. I do so because I know, more surely than I know anything, that any pang of healing or forgiveness, or goodness I have ever felt comes solely from the grace of God. (p. 42)

I would extend Yancey's words to include the discovery of community. When Scott Peck talks about finding community at the Friends school, when Daniel Taylor speaks of finding "kindred spirits" (2000), or when I find a group of people at an ANSR meeting who know me and understand me, that is an expression of the grace of God. If we are created by God for a purpose, and if that created life is moving on a journey that is part of a larger story, then the interactions that form self, story, and community are themselves reflections of the creation. In *Life Together* (1954), Bonhoeffer writes: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren. (p. 20)

Later in the same book, he argues that true community is only possible because of our common relationship to Jesus Christ. This, it seems to me, suggests that it is in that common receipt of grace that we interact at all. It is why I can (and must) tell you my story. It is why you are willing (and maybe even desire) to listen.

If community is but a gift of God's grace, why is it relatively rare? I think it is because our awareness of the operation of that grace is a variable phenomenon. In our groups, we can behave as if grace were not possible. We can operate in blindness to its presence. Yancey recognizes: Grace is everywhere, like lenses that go unnoticed because you are looking through them. Eventually God gave me eyes to notice the grace around me (p. 42)

A community that knows it is the recipient of God's grace is a remarkable thing. It has the power to weave together identity and story not through its organizational ability or its clever leadership, but precisely because it knows how to get out of the way. Perhaps this is why Scott Peck says that a group must pass through chaos before it finds community (1987). It is only when it stops trying to make things happen that the grace always operating can be discovered.

It is hard to build a theoretical framework around an absence of action. It is almost impossible to construct sociological theory around a theological concept like grace. And yet as David Whitelaw argued ten years ago, it is precisely because the argument isn't airtight that it has the potential for authentically bridging the gap between theology and sociology. I am coming to the conclusion that what we call social structures are real (so I can still be a sociologist), but they are not rigid. Our organizational systems and ten-year plans have merit, but they do not involve the stories of real people. What I am searching for is a process of emergence that always remains somewhat tentative. I believe that the concept of community allows us exactly that possibility.

## **Conclusions**

What does this all mean for a sociological examination of community expressed within a particular denomination? I want to make several concluding observations. First, a denomination must allow for the authentic expression of the stories of the real people who are its adherents. Opportunities must be found for the sharing of those stories, especially the ones that are hard to hear and have difficult endings. Within congregations, people need to have a voice that is unrestrained by fear of “what others might think”. Second, a denomination interested in community must find a balance between opposing tensions. There must be a balance between seeing that every congregation is unique and seeing that all churches are the same. There must be a balance between telling the few defining stories of the past and having a multitude of current stories without plot.

Third, a denomination interested in community must find a way to handle issues of power. To deny that power imbalances exist is neither sociologically sound nor true to the stories that people live. To hold power loosely is a difficult task, but is one that has community-building possibilities.

Finally, a denomination interested in community must make a commitment to discovering the operation of grace its primary responsibility. It is only as the individuals are empowered by grace that they can accept their identities. It is only as they see that their stories are not random that they can trust their fellow members and build the kingdom of God. It is only as leaders recognize that their position comes not by their skill and ability, but by the operating principle of grace that they find the freedom to lead without controlling the outcomes.

Earlier I suggested that the search for community is like Augustine’s search for something to fill the “God-shaped vacuum”. I have come to believe that we are all searching for a place to be ourselves, a place where they want to hear our story, and a place where what we do really matters. The good news is that when we do find that place, grace has been waiting there all along.

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