Notes on Innovative Experiments: Intentional Communities

September 6, 2014

"Another Athens shall arise,
And to remoter time
Bequeath, like sunset to the skies,
The splendor of its prime;
And leave, if naught so bright may live,
All earth can take or Heaven can give."
P.B. Shelley

I.   A fresh review of the principles, characteristics and practices of "intentional communities"

   a) raising questions

   b) examining principles, characteristics and practices

II.   What might be the "foundational principle" of any intentional community?

   a)   "All societies arise because of human interdependence – no individual is entirely self-sufficient since all individuals have needs that cannot be met except by cooperation with others." (paraphrase from Plato's Republic)

   b) Human needs can be stratified at different levels; there are "higher order" needs and "lower order" needs;

c) There are higher order intellectual and spiritual needs as well as lower order material needs that must be satisfied for there to be a viable, dynamically balanced community.

1. What are "higher order" needs? "Higher order" needs involve the cultivation of intellectual, moral and spiritual capacities, i.e., the acquisition of knowledge and the flowering of moral and social virtues;

   - Intellectual, moral and spiritual needs might be more aptly characterized as "fulfillment needs" rather than "deficiency needs";

   - "fulfillment needs" involve self-expression and self-discipline for their actualization while "deficiency needs" are dictated by psycho-physical necessities or what is lacking;

2. In this sense, "Lower order" needs involve the satisfaction of basic psycho-physical necessities that are crucial for sustaining individual and collective life; without satisfactorily meeting these needs, the fulfillment of higher order needs for self-expression is problematic;

   - For this reason, people or communities who are excessively poor and destitute need work and bread before they can be expected to participate in intellectual and spiritual culture to any sustainable degree; e.g., any slum in the big cities of the world such as is found in Mexico City, New York City, Mumbai, etc.

3. However, the excessive satisfaction of creature needs does not necessarily lead to the unfoldment of intellectual and spiritual development – material abundance may in fact lead to attitudes and

tendencies that weaken the desire to cultivate higher order needs for self-expression and self-transcendence;

- Understandably, peoples, communities or nations that enjoy great material abundance or unusual prosperity but don't actively seek opportunities for intellectual engagement and creative social encounters tend to slowly slip into lassitude, self-indulgence and isolationism; e.g., Wall Street and many wealthy suburbs in America and elsewhere;

d) The highest communities, then, attempt to harmonize the spiritual, intellectual and material growth of the individual, i.e., they seek a dynamically, rounded development of all individuals within their vibrant, pulsating circumferences;

1. Excess or deficiency in any one aspect of higher order or lower order human needs distorts the fullest possible development of the individual and the community as a whole;

2. Excess or deficiency should not, however, be understood mechanistically so much as they should be understood organically – but with a twist. Open-ended priorities have to be assigned by communities and individuals to address spiritual, intellectual and material aspirations with an appreciation of the intriguing but elusive ratios placed on all three dimensions of human development;

III. In the broadest sense, Why do "Intentional communities" arise?

a) Intentional communities (or micro-communities) arise because of the perception by some citizens of the larger society that there is a lack of (or excess of) any one or combination of the above three human needs : spiritual, intellectual and material;

b) In this sense, micro- communities often emerge as "conscious correctives" to perceived spiritual, intellectual and material deficiencies or injustices; e.g., New Lanark, Scotland; the Pilgrim Community at Plymouth, Mass.; the Shaker, Amish and Mennonite communities of New York and Pennsylvania;

c) Spiritual, moral and material "suffering" is thus often the catalysis that awakens the conscience of self-selected individuals, communities and even nations to seek radical reform;

d) Intentional communities can also arise out of a revolutionary vision of what is conceivable but has yet to be tried; it is gestated by a shared vision of the few for a better society -- one that integrates the spiritual, intellectual and material in a more wholesome and original way than presently occurs in contemporary culture; e.g., New Harmony in Indiana, Brook Farm in Mass. and the Oneida Community in New York were all based, in some sense, on daring conceptions of human perfection and self-improvement and not simply based on conventional notions of excess and deficiency in American culture;

e) "Visionary Communal experiments" usually claim to have a universal applicability -- with some allowances for unique cultural circumstances;

f) By-in-large, most intentional communities seem to incorporate both negative and positive motivations– an awareness of injustice and inequality in contemporary culture and a desire to present an elevating "alternate social reality";

IV. <u>Globally speaking, what might be some paradigms of "intentional communities"?</u>

a) Would the Pythagorean Community of ancient Greece be a paradigm of the "intentional community" -- with its quest for divine wisdom, its emphasis on cosmic harmony and universal brotherhood, its intense study of mathematics, geometry, astronomy and music, its renunciation of private property and its desire to uplift the Greek city state in Magna Greece? Yes, it would indeed be a paradigm.

b) Would the Buddhist Sangha of ancient India and later of Tibet be a paradigm of the "intentional community" -- with its emphasis on cultivating spiritual insight, nirvana, compassion and unconditional service to the lay community? Yes, it would indeed be a paradigm.

c) Would Gandhi's Ashrams in modern India be a paradigm of the "intentional community" -- with its commitment to truth, non-violence, social reform and service to the nation as a whole? Yes, it would indeed be a paradigm.

d) Would the founding of the American Republic in the 18th Century be a paradigm of the "intentional community" -- with its conscious declaration of the revolutionary principles of individual liberty and equality, its advocacy of a secular state and its openness to social mobility? Yes, it would indeed be a paradigm.

    1. At the time of its inception, the American Republic was a "micro-community" within the macro-community of nations across the globe;

    2. In a very real sense, the American Republic was a deliberate, democratic experiment whose radical principles of liberty and equality were courageously expressed in its Declaration of Independence and later on imperfectly formulated and incorporated into its written constitution;

3. Despite its revolutionary character – or perhaps, because of it -- America has subsequently spawned numerous radical mini-communities within its national boundaries as well as inspired other communal experiments across the globe;

e) Globally and historically speaking, it is important to acknowledge that all of the above noted paradigms of "intentional communities" are relative to their unique historical circumstances; but, at the same time, like all true paradigms, they are vibrant "teaching models" since every truly daring social experiment possess universal elements or characteristics that can be forwarded into the present era and be revitalized in a new form to suit the needs of an age;

f) The above point can be put in the following insightful way: "The classical is always contemporary." (Robert Maynard Hutchings)

V. What might be some of the primary characteristics of a viable "intentional community" – of any kind?

a) **Vision**: there must be a fresh vision of the beloved community, of an alternate social reality, of a feasible notion of collective good;

"Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs)

1. A "vision" must spell out not only a new social order or a fresh utopia, but it must erect a 'Jacob's ladder' that takes those who share in the vision from where they are now to where they wish to be;

2. Such a 'staircase vision' may be put in a variety of ways and in a number of compelling images but it must point to a more desirable

way of life or to more wholesome spiritual, intellectual and material conditions than presently prevail for people to give their hearts to it and to willingly run the risks involved;

3. Visions of a "New Jerusalem" or a "New Utopia" have come about in a number of diverse ways;

- A compelling vision can come about as a result of a comprehensive intuitive awakening such as must have occurred with the eminently wise and noble Pythagoras and the all-compassionate Buddha;

- Just such an "intuitive awakening" was chronicled in the writings of the prime mover of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine, when he spoke of the unfoldment before his "mind's eye" of a "New Order of the Ages" taking place on the American continent;

- A summoning vision can also be a result of deep rational thought on fresh applications of universal principles such as equality or justice; such an "intellectual epiphany" happened to the Utopian Socialist, Robert Owen, who realized that the transformation of society from inequality and deprivation of the masses to true equality and fellowship begins with intellectual and moral education of the young; e.g., his experiments in New Lanark, Scotland and in New Harmony, Indiana which established the first kindergarten classes in the United Kingdom and America and helped to eradicated child labor;

- Finally, a galvanizing communal vision can be the result of an inner revelatory experience (a "calling") of a new celestial order on earth as happened to Ann Lee of the Shaker

Community in in the 18th Century and as experienced by John Noyes of the Oneida Community in New York in the 19th Century;

b) **Vows**: to go against the social grain is inevitably painful as one is not only pioneering a new social path that often provokes adherents to the status quo but more likely than not, ignites a war within oneself too;

- Vows, as we know, are critical components to initiating, sustaining and renewing any number of important human activities, e.g., entering into marriage, entering into a monastery, joining the military, assuming the responsibilities of public office, undertaking the privilege of being a physician of the human body, etc.;

- 'Vow-taking" is equally critical to the success of any true intentional community, and, such vows take different forms, e.g., the taking of a sacred oath was a precondition to being a full member of the Pythagorean, Buddhist and Gandhian communities. Likewise, the signing of a covenant was a requirement to joining the Shaker Community and a "declaration of faith" through adult baptism was and is still a pre-condition to being an accepted member of the Amish community in America;

- In summary, vows involve the heart as well as the head and activate the deeper will to persist through the trials of communal life which inevitably come and which, if not surmounted, lead to eventual disintegration, separation and "death" of the community;

c) **Leadership**: all intentional communities need a person(s) who can articulate the common vision; they must also enjoy some degree of credibility and, most importantly, possesses daring, imagination and a

serene detachment from the criticism of mainstream society which might see the community's vision as eccentric, off center and peculiar; e.g., Pythagoras, Buddha, Gandhi, Tom Paine, Ann Lee of the Shakers, George and Sara Ripley of Brook Farm, Robert Owen of New Harmony and John Noyes of Oneida were all compelling figures and leaders who led by example and who likewise suffered the "slings and arrows of misfortune";

1. the leader of an intentional community must be able to inspire others to give up current freedoms and privileges – however limited – to embrace new and perhaps more challenging responsibilities;

2. Leadership is a call to new modes of relationships and new obligations that require one to renounce one's attachments before one can achieve or experience what a utopia promises;

d) **Cultivating spiritual, intellectual and social virtues;**

1. <u>spiritual virtues</u>: reverence, compassion, love, humility, gratitude;

   - In the Pythagorean Community reverence was paramount: reverence for the oath, reverence for the divine in the cosmos and in man, and, most especially, one must "revere the heroes who are full of goodness and light";

   - In the Buddhist Sangha, especially in Mahayana Buddhism, the stress is on compassion for all beings of whatever kind and in all Buddhist sects following the Eightfold Noble Path is paramount;

   - In the Amish Community of past and present, humility (absence of pride) and forgiveness are inculcated, e.g., google the news story of the non-Amish man who killed five Amish school girls and injured five others in 2006. The Amish community's forgiveness of

the slain murderer and their active forgiveness of the murder's parents helped the latter to come out of their despair and shame and to remember the best in their son;

- Gandhi's Ashrams strongly fostered love, non-violence and service to the least in society so that one may come closer to God and the divine in man; (this was also the teaching of St. Francis);

- In Echo Truly Park in Lima, Peru the principal motivation seems to be reverence for Nature expressed through instantiating ecological principles in agriculture and active modes of fellowship in daily interaction;

2. <u>intellectual or cognitive virtues</u>: reasonableness, clarity, a questioning spirit, integrity (honesty about what you know and don't know), a desire to integrate knowledge with appropriate action and open-mindedness;

    - The Pythagorean Community's golden patterns of living likewise cultivated the "community of the mind" by requiring the study of mathematics, geometry, astronomy and music as aids to impersonal reasoning and the recognition that proportion and harmony are the keys to right living and the activation of divine wisdom latent in the human soul;

    - In various Buddhist Sanghas or monasteries emphasis is on fostering profound insight through the refined analysis of moral and psychological states and of their complex interaction;

    - In the Tamera Peace Research Village in today's Portugal much emphasis is placed on the conspicuous integration of the

spiritual and the scientific with the social (the community was founded by a theologian, a physicists and a psychologist);

3. <u>social virtues</u>: cooperation, renunciation of private property, hard work, sharing of responsibilities (role flexibility), communal celebrations and the observance of silence in work as well as in worship;

   - Most intentional communities encourage the above qualities to different degrees and in different forms;

4. It is important to grasp that all "virtues" – of whatever order -- are essential to community growth and individual flourishing; they negate the corrosives of greed, competition, anger, arrogance, selfishness and the like that eventually enervate cultures ;

   - According to David DeSteno, professor of Psychology at Northwestern University, emotions such as gratitude, compassion, authentic pride, and even guilt are "inoculations against temptations and, just like antibodies in our bloodstream, will be ready and willing to combat possible threats to our well-being."

   - DeSteno claims that extensive socio-psychological research confirms that "emotional intelligence" is pivotal to human growth. Rationality and ethical rules are not enough for individual flourishing since they often fail to arouse the will on a consistent basis. In addition to rational understanding and moral principles, we need the social affections and virtues that positively connect us to each other and yield some form of shared happiness;

e) **Communal rules and patterns**: there must be a minimal consensus on the ways and means in which people can relate to each other and perform necessary duties for the sake of the entire community;

1. Many rules, practices and communal observance are attempts to re-visualize primary relationships:

   - Parent and child (family). This relationship is nourished in most intentional communities of the past, including the Shakers who were celibates, but, nonetheless, took in orphans and adopted children and were respected for their balance of warmth and discipline in raising children;

   - Teacher and student (education). New Harmony in Indiana, Brook Farm in Boston, Mass. were both known for their educational innovations;

   - Individual labor and its fruits (wealth). Most intentional communities insist on some form of "commonwealth" over private property – whether cooperative capitalism, consensus socialism, communism or trusteeship;

   - The male-female relationship (marriage, fidelity and children). This primary relationship was front-and-center in earlier American communities such as the Shaker Community, Oneida Community, Brook Farm and New Harmony;
   - Community celebrations and collective renewal observances. This is common to all intentional communities and takes a variety of different forms;

   - "Self-as-is" and "self-as-one-wishes-to-be" (actual and potential individual "flourishing"). This is the central problem of "individuating", of intelligently integrating individual liberty

with communal obligation which is the central challenge of communities large and small, conservative or radical;

2. There must also be rules for new entrants and likewise for community expulsion; this involves "sifting" applicants for joining the community and dealing with rule violators;

a) new entrants:

- the Pythagorean, Buddhist, Gandhian and Shakers, like most spiritual or religious communities, had strict moral and religious criteria for becoming members;

- New Harmony of Indiana, Counter Culture Communes of the 1960s in America and many emerging, green communities of the early 21st Century have few (if any) objective preconditions for membership, i.e., membership is (or was) usually subjectively determined or an outgrowth of a particular attitude of mind such as being anti-establishment, anti-materialistic, etc.)

- The Brook Farm in Boston, Mass. in the 19th Century and Eco-Village in Ithaca, New York in the 21st Century both require(d) participants to become stockholders or to purchase houses to become full-fledged members;

b) rule violators and community expulsions:

- intentional communities usually deal with serious violations of rules or codes in some internal manner before resorting to expulsion;

- For example, "mutual criticism" in the Oneida Community of New York was a collective means of aiding a member in

his/her efforts toward self-perfection. It involved a member sitting before a group of peers and listening without protest to each member's appraisal of one's virtues and vices;

- The communal corrective of "shunning" in the Amish community works in a different way in that, after ignoring repeated warnings by Amish Elders, a rule violator is not spoken to by others nor allowed to attend community services; (see the movie, "Witness"). if the rule violator is not remorseful and subsequently reforms (or conforms), then he or she will be expelled;

f) **relationships with the larger society**: most intentional communities establish rules for interacting with the larger society of which they are a part; such rules affect how communal members perceive and are perceived by the larger society;

1. Some intentional communities strive to isolate themselves from modern society as much as possible, e.g., the Amish, Mennonite and Hutterite communities in America. These communities usually take to heart Christ's statement, "Come ye out and be ye separate."

2. Other intentional communities actively wish to relate to society in some constructive manner, e.g., Pythagorean, Buddhist, Gandhian, New Harmony, Brook Farm, Green Communes, etc.

3. Interestingly enough, many micro-communities that try to reform the larger society of which they are a part seem to have a short life-span, e.g., the original Pythagorean Community in Croton, Italy, New Harmony in Indiana, Brook Farm in Massachusetts and Oneida in New York, while those that do the opposite (insulate themselves) last longer, e.g., Amish, Mennonite, Hutterite;

4. However, those who wish to reform society often have a more decided effect on society over the long run than do those that are more insular;

VI.   Intentional Communities: Appraising Success and Failure

a) It is important to make a meaningful appraisal of intentional communities but in so doing, it is always more important to assess such pioneering experiments by their own standards or purposes than by our own often artificial or conventional criteria;

b) For this reason, an intentional community's length of duration in space-time and its immediate historical impact on the wider society might at first glance be more misleading than helpful.

c) Interestingly enough, any helpful appraisal of a historical micro-community must begin with the acceptance of "death"; that all communities, cultures and civilizations must descend after reaching their zenith – however long and complex their "dying out" might take. Without this implicit acknowledgement we will not understand their real contribution to the human experience. If we acknowledge the inevitability of "death" in communal terms, we will not easily fall into the trap of believing that longevity is more significant than wholesome qualities briefly expressed, or rather, that mere longevity must itself mean success and that an intentional community's lack of existence and persistence through time is the equivalent of never approximating its vision in an exemplary fashion. Analogically speaking, this is equivalent to saying that because Mozart and Ramanujan died relatively young their contributions to music and mathematics could not have been great.

d) We need to entertain multiple criteria of constructive appraisal. On that basis we could constructively extract and extrapolate both

successes and failures in such a way that they could meaningfully contribute to more enlightened communal initiatives as well as prove germane to the evolution of future civilizations who incubate more wholesome visions – ones that accommodate the many within the one;

VII. <u>Gandhi on the sage and not the saint as the ideal citizen of the beloved community;</u>

a) The self-governed sage of the *Gita* is the model community member because without self-governance man is not able to realize his potential in the human community;

b) self-governance in its many-dimensional meanings leads to self-knowledge – the ability to distinguish the best in ourselves and others from the worst, the heroic from the cowardly;

c) Paradoxically, enlightened self-governance is necessary for self-expression, for releasing spiritual abundance and intellectual richness. Self-regulation in its more expansive meaning is not simply self-restraint but a heart grasp of the spirit of moral and social rules as well as their creative instantiation. In a communal sense, self-governance encourages role flexibility and role transcendence as well as role specificity;

d) The activation of the individual's spiritual potential as well as his moral an intellectual abilities can only occur within a harmonic community whose social, economic and political life dynamically reflect higher order aspirations;

e) The saint as a model focusses on goodness and salvation and, in so doing, often feels at a loss for effectively coping with the evils in human nature and their pervasiveness in society. However, the sage

seeks that higher self-knowledge and self-governance that allows him to benefit the community through intelligently focusing the good in myriad contexts while wisely taking into account the limitations and limits of circumstances and personalities;

f) One of the keys to individual growth in self-governance and communal uplift lies in the Pythagorean nightly review or what the Buddhists call "self-study". The latter is undertaken for the sake of gaining skill in action, for serving others within and without one's community;

g) Self-study is a necessary companion to self-restraint and self-expression. It fosters honesty, humility and self-understanding. This is important because blindness to the ways in which individual and social evil work on the better nature of man is no less a problem in communities than is lack of unswerving faith in the good;

h) For this reason, knowledge of evil, perceived limitations, human weaknesses and institutional violence as well as knowledge of virtues, potentials and strengths is a precondition for growth in a complex community of beneficent and evil influences;

i) From a Gandhian standpoint, if we do not admit the internal struggle in each human heart between good and evil, virtue and vice, generosity and greed, then we get either the messianic leader or the cynic and doomsayer – whatever moral language each might profess;

j) In the end, the Gandhian message is that we need committed "objective idealists", who, like the sage, fear no evil because they confront it and yet consistently affirm the good in credible ways. We do not need (nor should we defer to) either cynical realists or romantic dreamers;

k) Awareness of various strengths and limitations in oneself, others and the community is no basis for final judgments of any kind. Human actions are always open to communal appraisal but only in the light of spiritual, intellectual and material aims that can only be approximated at best. Perfectibility is more important to stress in practice than perfection;

l) Integral to the awakening the potential good within the individual and the community, Gandhi believed that intentional communities should foster silence, quietude and contemplation at different times of the day. Such practices are the crown jewels of the tiara of self-discovery, self-expression and of all communal activities of whatever kind;

m) Dialectically speaking, there can be quiet and calm reflection even while working together and there can be a felt sense of community – and even communing – while one is in the depths of solitude;

n) Relationship and solitude are the quintessential dialectical principles that all communal experiments attempt to creatively address in their own unique and admirable ways.