

CROW'S CAWS

by crow cohen



In Praise of Community

I belong to four communities. It would be great if I could just be part of one community that met all my needs, but I simply don't live in a *shtetl* like my grandparents did – those tiny villages in Eastern Europe where Jews lived, worked, worshipped and played together because they were restricted by law from participating in the mainstream Christian culture. I'm not suggesting that my ancestors had an idyllic rural life; they were terribly oppressed. Yet, the sense of community was so powerful back then, I'm sure that is one of the reasons they must have both been rounded up so easily, as well as survived the Holocaust.

I'm lucky to have four communities. Some people don't have any sense of belonging in

their lives. That's not surprising, given that our culture is founded on privatization, self-sufficiency, materialism and competition. When I speak of community, I'm not just talking about families, neighborhoods or friendship circles. Although they all do give us a sense of belonging, I'm referring to groups of people who come together because they share common interests, beliefs or values and maintain connection for support or to work towards common goals. Long-lasting, fulfilling communities are as hard to sustain as marriages – but when they work, they are one of the biggest gifts life has to offer.

The first community I want to pay homage to is my work "family." I have been employed for eleven years at a

humane, functional agency. Hard to believe, I know. The work we do (providing health care to elders, disabled and dying people in their own homes) is rewarding because we often become close to our vulnerable clients. Hence, the staff has learned to take care of each other or else we would never last on the job. We cry with each other; we approach problems as a team; we give each other little presents; we laugh a lot; we eat lunch together; and we go to a whole lot of funerals together. When I walk into work, I feel a coziness that warms my heart even though I rarely see these people socially.

The second community, of which I have been a part for 12 years, is my spiritual community. This hugely diverse motley crew keeps me grounded, sane and connected to a power greater than myself. We, too, laugh a lot. We also help each other through personal tragedies, celebrations, and just the ups and downs of ordinary life. We inspire each other, visit each other in hospitals, help each other move, and keep each other honest. When I walk into a room where this community gathers, any feeling of isolation that may have been swirling around in my head dissipates 90% of the time. Talk about a gift.

The third community is my religious community. This group is connected to my ancestors, my roots. We are part of a tradition that goes back 3000 years. I don't always feel like I belong the minute I'm in contact with these folks, but there is a very deep part of myself that needs to maintain connection no matter how much resistance I feel. I am always welcome when I do show up. They need me, too. That helps.

The most tenuous community with which I belong is my lesbian community. All my other communities have lesbians in them, but that is not their main focus. Back in the

'70s and early '80s, the Burlington lesbian feminist community was incredibly cohesive – similar to a *shtetl* as a matter of fact. One of the lesbians I interviewed when doing research on our community said, "Part of it was the politic we had developed – that [feminism] is crucial work. We were way out there, and we were doing really alive and exciting things. The way we fed each other – that's what was at the bottom of what kept us all in [the community]. We had a passion [about our politics] that was fun. We played together. We loved each other's kids." Several of us lived in close proximity which also helped. One dyke said, "Monroe St., Peru St., Intervale Ave. – [we lived in] all these mini-communes. At any given time, one person [from a household] would be sleeping over at another place. Everybody lived everywhere. I remember walking the streets of the Old North End as if the streets were part of the community. You would shop at the Co-op and half the people who worked there were the lesbians that lived in these community houses."

We pooled our money, raised each other's children, created art together and staged political actions together. We also debated a lot. One lesbian said, "If there weren't some confrontation, considering that feminism is not monolithic and we all bring different perspectives to the table, I would be suspicious. Conflict doesn't have to be a precursor to war. Conflict is not a bad thing. It's a good thing. I mean there's conflict in nature. There has to be." But not all of us were able to tolerate these vociferous debates. "Everybody was fighting with each other, and I became very disillusioned with women. I guess in my own infantile way, I put women on a pedestal. It was really difficult to see women bickering and fighting actually come to blows with each other. It made me not want to be a part of it."

Despite all these close-knit communities, I can still feel awfully lonesome. All communities bicker. All communities feel threatening at one time or another. Communities are as hard to commit to as intimate partnerships. My four communities annoy the hell out of me

from time to time, but I'd be lost without them at this point in my life. Perhaps the reason communities based on ideology are shakier is because they do not have long traditions, a cohesive system of ethics, or a tight organizational structure to hold them together. Ideologies often change rapidly given the way society is moving along at lightning speed. One lesbian analyzed the breakdown of the lesbian feminist community this way: "In Burlington, I felt there was this little tight walnut where we had to keep that shell on at that time or else [the community] would completely break down, and we wouldn't have each other. There was this sense in our small community of hanging on [to one another], keeping separate [from the rest of the town]. We were so intense, so hard on ourselves, and on each other that women just felt they had to get the hell out of Burlington, and some did. Others retreated into their little worlds and didn't interact much anymore."

Nevertheless, there was something unforgettable about being part of a community that met all our needs at once, even if it only lasted a few years. It is a phenomenon that rarely occurs in "advanced civilizations" where staring at computer and TV screens all day and night seem to isolate us all the more. I think there are still political communities that are thriving in Vermont, but their purpose is to promote an agenda, not to sustain each other's personal lives on a daily basis. Perhaps if I live long enough, all my communities will merge. By some miracle, I'll find myself surrounded by loving people who help pay my expenses, nurture my soul, respect my tradition and have similar values. Perhaps that's not happening for me because I'm not really ready to try again even if such a community exists, or I could try to form one. I still have some healing to do from the last attempt. Meanwhile, I'm grateful for what I have, and I know this much: the process of hanging in there with my particular assortment of imperfect communities is excellent preparation for utopia.

Crow Cohen is a lesbian feminist who lives in Winooski.

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