

The Educative Community?

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It might seem obvious that we are a community, we who meet at conferences to share our ideas, we who profess to add to the flourishing of educational institutions, we who share the common experience of teaching, of researching, of leading academic lives. It seems obvious to me. I feel a sense of community with my fellow scholars. I board an airplane to attend a conference, even though I might rather stay home. I think we have all experienced this tension: To participate in an activity of community is to feel a tension between one's personal desires and one's sense of human obligation. Or, it might be better to say that there is sometimes a sense of tension in community activity. Certainly, most people have also experienced times when an activity of community sits perfectly well with what one wants to do most. Sometimes, attendance at a conference, participation in a political meeting, or, being asked to speak before one's community, sometimes these are activities that fit very well with who one is at his or her very core.

While José Mesa in the essay, "Revisiting an Old Predicament: Primacy of the Individual or the Community?" gives a thoughtful account of the tension between individual and community, I want to explore further the more seamless cases of individual/community interaction that he has left out. For while I do agree with Mesa that the tension between individual and community has been a key insight of political philosophy throughout modern times, it remains to be seen, at least in the context of Mesa's essay, what this tension has to do with education or pedagogy. Indeed, I respond to Mesa's essay as a member of an educational community. And my very response to this essay is an instance where I feel my own individuality to be quite in concert with the community of educators whom I have come such a long way, all the way from Vancouver, British Columbia, to see. By pointing to the educational omission of this essay, I am not trying to take the low road of pointing to any old theme that Mesa's essay did not address. That would be wrong given the limitations put on our submissions. I intend to force this fine essay to think more about education. Doing so seems necessary, and in fact enjoyable, as I am a member of the educational community.

I would like to start by giving an example of a person whom I consider to be perfectly at ease with his own individuality as it intersects with his membership in a greater community. And though I do not know anything about this man's education, I will make the case that the sort of seamless individual/community interaction that typifies this man quotes life shows that he has been very well educated. I came to know this well-educated person only recently, upon the death of my mother. Let me start back even farther, at the death of my mother.

Just before my maternal grandmother passed away, my father purchased seven cemetery plots, each four feet by eight feet, each costing forty dollars. One of these plots was for my grandmother, one for my father, one for my mother, and four for

me and my three siblings should we choose to be buried there. My grandmother was buried on her plot, and my mother has just been interred on her piece of land at this cemetery. What has struck me about these plots, in addition to the simplistic beauty of a woody cemetery on a rural island in Washington State, is the conscientiousness of the caretaker who looks after this burial ground. I have learned about his conscientiousness because I was asked to tend to the burial of my own mother, who died just a few weeks ago. After my mother passed away, I got to be in close contact with the caretaker of our family cemetery. This man, Jeff is his name, gives freely of his own time to go out and dig the graves of those who are to be interred there. He does not ask for payment; he does not hesitate to make the burial of someone he does not even know a first priority. He does so out of a sense of community with the island dwellers among whom he has lived for the past few decades.

He is a member of the Fox Island community, and for members of the community who have family who have passed away, he is willing to meet at any time and without any compensation. Because he is the sole cemetery groundskeeper on the island, and has been for the last twenty-five years, he carries out whatever responsibilities are necessary to make sure that folks on the island are buried with the utmost care and in a timely manner. He does so without remuneration; he does so because of a sense of community.

After having several conversations on the telephone with this cemetery keeper, what strikes me is the way that his personal sense of identity is not in tension with his social sense of community. Jeff, the cemetery keeper, seems completely at ease with his duty to community, and that duty does not seem to keep him from making what might seem to others to be great personal sacrifices in order to make sure that folks who have lived on the island are buried in a timely and affordable manner. Monetary and time-related commitments are very much in sync with Jeff's devotion to island community. He will come to dig a grave at most any time, at no expense to the person who needs his services. Although I cannot get inside of Jeff's head, my discussions with him have led me to conclude that his community identity serves to shore up his individual identity. Community and personhood are isomorphic in a very healthy way. There is mutual reinforcement rather than conflicting tension.

In Mesa's essay, there is a tendency to follow the logic of Charles Taylor's text, *Sources of the Self*, a tendency to assume that the individual is historically situated to be at odds with the community. Although I do not doubt that this is an accurate interpretation of Taylor's assessment of self, I wonder if a fiery opposition between the individual and community is as useful during an assessment of pedagogical situations as it is during a summary of Western metaphysics. I wonder if there might be another relation between individual and community that is less historically Hegelianized than Taylor's, and more appropriate for the specific circumstances that are faced by students in classrooms. While it is certainly true that an individualist orientation has made important contributions, both epistemically and morally, to the pre-modern, community-friendly orientation toward being, one must still wonder what this tension of orientations adds to classroom experience. One must still wonder if educational experience is mainly suited to explore this tension, or, whether

educational experience might be better suited to explore the potential for seamlessness between the individual and the community. In short, what I want to ask is to what extent Jeff, the cemetery caretaker might be an example of one who, because of his happy orientation towards community, is an educational exemplar rather than a throwback to pre-modern sensibilities. Or let me put this another way. I want to consider the possibility that education might be an after-modern intervention. By after-modern here, I do not mean the postmodern that has been so hotly debated in theoretical circles. I mean rather an educational after-modern that goes one step further than the modern tension that Mesa has described so well. I mean an educational project that aims at the self-actualization of students as community members even while modernity tends to create a tension between individual and community. Is it possible that education might be best understood as an endeavor to hone individual aspirations to be in sync with the aspirations of specific communities even if this honing might have to come after (post) a time when the individual has experienced his or her lot of tension, a tension that is certainly inevitable in modern life. To address this possibility, I want first to follow Taylor's own account of education in order to show how the theme of individual/community tension gets educationalized. Then, I will offer a different account of education's place within the individual/community intersection.

Taylor's account of education is one with which Mesa is no doubt familiar.¹ According to Taylor, the student arrives at school as the member of a community. However, the school is a public space where the student is asked to become an individual among others rather than being primarily a member of one's home community. Thus there is a typically modern tension that one experiences in school. The student is faced with the tension between the home community and this new grouping of individuals at school. As Taylor rightly points out, there is great danger that this tension can lead to alienation. If one arrives at school to find that one's home community is depicted in a confining, demeaning, or contemptible way, then there will be a loss of dignity on the part of the student. The tension between individual and community can denigrate into a loss of dignity if the home community of an individual is not given positive recognition. It is in this way that Taylor advocates for the politics of recognition in places like schools. In order for dignity to be preserved, and in order that the tension between individual and community be an epistemic gain rather than something worse, students need to see themselves reflected at school. Students must be exposed to school texts that offer a positive mirroring their home communities.

THE DANGER WITH THIS RECOGNITIVE

The danger with this recognitive account of schooling lies in the way it equates the community in general with the more specific case of one's home community. When Taylor mentions, for example, that each person has a unique horizon with which he or she enters the public sphere, there is a sense in which the community with which the individual comes into tension is a fairly fixed community. There is a sense in which education is not in a position to offer students other communities, but is rather in the sole position of reflecting the pre-existing communities to which students belong. And, I sense in Mesa's use of Taylor (and in his thoughtful

augmentation of Taylor using Ricoeur and Mounier) a similar tendency to assume that individuals come into tension primarily with pre-existing communities. Mesa uses three examples of the community/individual tension: that of a gay man or woman who must give up personal advantages in order to struggle against homophobia, that of a woman who must do likewise in order to work against sexism, and that of person living in a poor community who must sacrifice creature comforts in order to keep living close to the people to whom she is devoted. Each of these scenarios echoes Taylor's tension between the individual and community. However, each of these scenarios also echoes Taylor's depiction of community as a fixed entity.

Indeed, Taylor's account of schooling and recognition makes the mistake of assuming that the great march of history is repeated at the local level of the school. He assumes that the school is a site of tension between the individual and a fixed community, well, because all modern institutions are sites of such a tension just by virtue of being modern. And although Mesa does not speak much to education, I am lead to assume that his essay intends something for educational practices, and the something that follows from this essay does not entertain the notion that schools are places where students might experience something much different from tension when it comes to the individual/community intersection.

What I want to do is to posit the school as a place where communities are forged, communities that might well be perfectly in sync with one's individual identity rather than being in tension with it. While I think that Mesa is correct to identify a certain creative tension that occurs between individuals and communities in educational situations, I think that much more can go on as well. I go back to Jeff, the cemetery caretaker. After having spoken with Jeff at some length, I take him to be a well-educated person. I found out that he has finished both high school and college, and I can imagine the sorts of individual/community struggles that he has gone through during the course of his education. He may have been born and raised on Fox Island, the community to which he is so happily affixed now, or, he may hail from elsewhere—little matter really. Wherever he started out, I am sure that he has gone through the individual/community struggles of modernity that Mesa reminds us to respect. He has no doubt had opportunities to disengage from community, to strike out on his own.

What is crucial to me about Jeff is that he has turned out the way he has in spite of the modern predicament of tension. It seems very difficult these days for a person to negotiate the tensions of modernity and somehow come out as an after-modern, as someone who has re-connected to some sort of community, as someone who has, to use Friedrich Nietzsche's phrase, come to an *amor fati* in the context of a specific community.²

Now, I actually doubt that Jeff learned of his specific community during the course of his schooling, but who is to say that other sorts of communities should not be more thoroughly explored during educational experiences, and to the same end? It is often the case that students learn of new communities during the course of their schooling, and that many students first explore and then maintain a seamless intersection between their individuality and this new community. I take the gay and

lesbian community on many college campuses and on some high school campuses as a good example. In many cases, gay and lesbian students are able to come to a fuller sense of self by virtue of learning that there is another home community available to them that is quite different from their primary home community. In many schools, both secondary and post-secondary, there are communities that exist to promote anti-racism. Many students join such school communities, making it their seamless joy to band together with others who are also fighting the racist acts that continue unchecked in our racist world. Other students come to experience the community of political activism as a new home.

Others come to experience specific intellectual or scholarly communities as places where self is seamlessly connected to a different sort of affiliation. In fact, when at the beginning of this essay I used myself as an example of a member of this particular educational community, as a member who feels it to be quite a seamless endeavor to keep my community needs in sync with my individual needs, I am using this example because I have myself come to this seamless sense of individual/community intersection through the process of education. I learned of this very community of education scholars through my post-secondary education. Yes, it may be that I will always feel some tension when I begin a long journey away from my home community. However, the community of philosophers of education is one that quickly makes me forget that tension. Here, I am part of a social body (whose fate I love), to go back to Nietzsche's phrase. And instructively, some students experience in school a revitalized interest in their own home community. For example, I have seen quite a few students at the university where I work in Vancouver, British Columbia, take a renewed interest in their Indo-Canadian community. This last example being particularly instructive because it indicates that a school community may take one in unrealized directions, or, on the contrary, it may encourage a re-exploration, an *amor fati* of community to which one has always belonged, only previously with less vigor. I submit that education can offer an introduction to a different way of existing within community. The promise of education does not lie in its recapitulation of the modernist tension between individual and community. It lies rather in the possibility that students might explore new (or old) communities in seamless ways. And, education might be said to be successful to the extent that students continue on with the firm conviction of one who happily tends to his community's small piece on this earth.

1. Charles Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition in Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 68.