

Cornel West and Prophetic Thought

REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY WITHIN COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

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Much of the current research and writing on Community of Inquiry has focused on inquiry, specifically, it has focused on classroom discussion and how to move a classroom discussion in the direction of forming a community of inquiry. This is as it should be. Community of Inquiry, while finding its origins in Pierce's idea of a 19th century scientific community, has become focused and defined first in John Dewey and more recently and fully in Philosophy for Children (Lipman, Sharp, Onscanyan, 1980; Lipman, 1991) and in particular in the work of Ann Margaret Sharp (Sharp, 1985; Sharp, 1991). The current work by Laurance Splitter and Ann Sharp (in press) will provide a even more fully developed picture of community of inquiry within classroom practice and philosophy for children.

This paper argues that the community aspect of community of inquiry also needs to be examined. The point is that if scholars (both adult and younger scholars) are seen to function best within communities, then an understanding of communities as they exist outside of scholarship might also inform our understanding of community of inquiry. Community, as a physical and social space for human enterprise and development, appears to be an area of growing concern (Arendt, 1958; Flanagan, 1991; Rawls, 1993; Taylor, 1993; Unger, R.M., 1987). Charles Taylor's work is of

special interest as it focuses on the individual and community within a modern liberal democracy. Charles Taylor (1991) in *The Ethics of Authenticity* examines the self in relationship to the community and/or communal values. Taylor challenges the postmodern understanding of the authentic self as self defeating if it is not embedded in an on going dialogue with the community that gives rise to the creation of the individual. Owen Flanagan in *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* takes a similar approach arguing that even self-respect is communally based. "The principle states that it is a necessary condition for possessing the primary good of self-respect that one experiences one's life as respected by others one respects. Self-respect is not something one can gain totally by one's self" (p. 120). John Rawls's in *Political Liberalism* addresses the issue of justice within a liberal society. It is within this context, that is, the examination of the relationship between liberal society, personal and moral development, community and communal values that the work of Cornel West makes its contribution. West, though his focus on community is more implicit than explicit (at least none of his major publications have community in the title and community is rarely found in the indexes of his major works), nonetheless makes significant contributions to our understanding of community by addressing among other issues multiculturalism, postmodernism and race (1993, 1993).

A WORKING DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY

John Dewey defines community as a group of like-minded but diverse individuals who come together around a common concern over time (Dewey, 1897). The key features of community are like-mindedness and diversity. Like-mindedness allows us to define problems and to work together to find solutions that we can all agree on. Diversity, at least one aspect of it, implies that there are persons with different types of skills and different skill levels as well as different kinds of and different levels of knowledge and experience. The different skill levels are present in part because there are people of different ages within the community. Further, people of different ages are essential in a community if the community is to continue in time. The age differences imply different levels and different kinds of skills and knowledge that are at the basis of and require education as a community activity. In other words, communities, in order to function, require more informed persons to pass on what they know to the less informed. Thus age diversity, Dewey argues, is a requirement of the human condition as infants are born with few skills and older adults will eventually need the skills of younger adults for comfort and survival.

As Dewey makes clear, community implies, and a democratic society, requires, education. Dewey goes on to argue that education is based on inquiry, that is, figuring things out, planning and solving problem that arise from the world around us. We solve these problems together in the places in which these problems arise, namely in communities. One form of these communities are schools.

Communities, whether the communities of schools, intentional communities, or accidental communities, do not exist for their own sake, but rather to improve the lives of the individual members and the community as a whole. A community by definition implies people working together. Even the dictionary definition states: a unified body of individuals; the people with common interests living in a particular area (Merriam West-er's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993, p. 233). Interest is the operative word that connects Dewey's understanding of community to the dictionary definition. Interest, Hannah Arendt argues in *The Human Condition* (1954) is a cement of human interaction. Arendt (19954) in discussing human action looks to the root words that are the etymology of interest: *inter* (from the latin – between) and *est* (again from the latin – to be). Thus interest is what lies between individuals, it is that which is between persons. Interest is what forms

community. Interest implies community and communication (Morehouse, 1991).

John Rawls in *Political Liberalism* (1993) defines community in a more general sense. He sees community as “a special kind of association” (p. 40), united by a comprehensive doctrine. Rawls provides an important distinction between community and a liberal society. Communities are closed systems, while a liberal society is an open system. Further, communities have defined final ends and aims, while liberal societies do not. Owen Flanagan (1991), while discussing what he calls social union (what I would call a community) and drawing on the work of John Rawl's, states:

For some set of social relations to constitute a bona fide social union, it must possess three characteristics: (1) shared final ends, (2) common activities valued for themselves, (3) affection and civic friendship among participants. Science, orchestral performance, games, families, friendship, civic and fraternal organizations, a just society itself — the “social union of social unions” — all fit the bill (p. 129).

Flanagan's definition is consistent with Rawls' definition of a community and by most definitions would not violate the foundation of what goes into a community of inquiry.

It is within this tradition of community that Cornel West's idea of a prophetic voice connects. His perspective is further connected to and grows from his experience in the “African-American Church.”

PROPHETIC THOUGHT

Cornel West in an essay entitled “Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism” in *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (1993) sets out four basic components or features of what he call prophetic thought. I focus on West's essay in *Prophetic Thought* because prophetic thought is the intellectual work that needs to be done within communities. This intellectual work has four features: discernment, connection, tracking hypocrisy and hope. After briefly outlining what West means by prophetic thought in general and these elements in particular, I will first examine how these ideas are connected to community in general and then explore the relationship between community and community of inquiry.

Prophetic thought must have the capacity to provide a broad and deep analytic grasp of the problem with regard to its cultural and historic context (West, 1993, p. 3). West sees prophetic

thought and the role of the prophet in the biblical tradition; the prophets task is not to predict the future, as we now often think about a prophet, but to “call a people back to themselves,” that is, to remind us who we are and what we might become. What West means by that will become more clear with the presentation of the four elements of prophetic thought.

Discernment concerns the capacity to provide a broad and deep systematic comprehension of the present in the light of the past. To be systematic, discernment must be historical, having the “ability to remain attuned to the ambiguous legacies and hybrid cultures in history” (West, 1993, p. 4). West makes the point about discernment by talking about the meaning of multiculturalism. He argues that to speak of a multicultural society may be to in some way already miss an important point about culture, that is, all cultures are already hybrid cultures. We like to think of the United States as a multicultural society composed of, for example, European-American or African-Americans, but any European or African society is already a hybrid or multicultural society. Ireland makes an interesting example as it is already made of many cultures: the Celts, the Anglos, the Goths, the Visigoths, the Normans, etc. The same is true of African culture, not only are there many nations within the African continent but many cultural antecedents to those nations: Egyptian, Greek, Phoenician, and Muslim antecedents — to name a few. Every culture that we know is the result of the weaving together of antecedent cultures. “Elements of antecedent cultures create something new based on that which came before” (p. 4). The ability to see the nested nature of culture is a form of discernment as it looks beneath the surface at the ambiguous legacies we inherit. Discernment also involves subtle analysis by which West means “powerful descriptions and persuasive explanations of wealth and status and prestige” (p. 4). To understand any historical situation we must understand something about the positions of the key players who make the decisions (wealth, power and prestige) as well as the position (wealth, power, and prestige) of those who benefit or suffer from those decisions.

Connection is the next element of the intellectual work called prophetic thought. Connection is a form of empathy. It is the power to get in communication with, to connect with, to “walk in the shoes of” the anxieties and frustrations of others (p. 5). More generally, it is the ability and the desire to remain in contact with the humanity of ourselves and others. The relationship between community and connection is obvious. While one can be connected with another individual, many, if not most, problems and solutions to anxieties

and frustrations occur within communities.

Tracking hypocrisy is the next bit of intellectual work required of prophetic thought. “By keeping track of human hypocrisy, I mean accenting boldly, and defiantly, the gap between principles and practice, between promise and performance, between rhetoric and reality” (p. 5). To fully address the issue of hypocrisy, we need to include our own hypocrisy, or potential hypocrisy, in the formula. West notes that “we are often complicit with the very thing that we are criticizing” (p. 6). Tracking hypocrisy is one of the ways insuring “self-correction” which is so essential to any progressive work. While a self-correcting enterprise may include more than tracking hypocrisy, certainly tracking hypocrisy is an important element of self-correction as it provides a criteria for self-correction. Self-correction is a counter-measure to self-importance as it places one’s own work within the same set of criteria to be applied to the work of others.

The final element required for the intellectual work of prophetic thought is hope. Hope comes from and is required for the capacity of human communities to solve problems. Human hope depends on our ability to solve problems within communities and hope declines and even dies if we feel that we can not make a difference by our thoughts and actions. In discussing hope, West for the first time in this essay speaks of community specifically. This is, I think, significant as it shows West’s commitment to solutions within a community structure.

PROPHETIC THOUGHT AND COMMUNITY

What does prophetic thought have to do with community? Prophetic thought is a form of intellectual work and it might be argued that an intellectual can not work outside of a community, or if she does so the work will be meaningless. The analogy is the work of an artist. While an artist may well work alone, one can not imagine an artist with out an audience, even if that audience might be very remote. The audience for the intellectual worker is more accurately thought of as a community as the work is done with rather than for someone. However, it is the element of hope that most connects the intellectual to community. If hope is based on and builds from the ability to solve problems, the intellectual should be a vital part of the solution. These problems are to be solved in common if we are to develop a sense of hope, for hope is a communal, more than an individual virtue. It is because of a sense of hope that one can develop the ability to discern, to look be-

neath the surface, to see the present in the light of the past and the future.

Dewey (1897) makes it clear that education and community are closely connected. As intellectual workers in education, we need to be aware of and participate in the intellectual work of other communities that we find ourselves living in. If educational reform is to take hold, particularly the transformation of classrooms into communities of inquiry, then conceptual and practical (or political) bridges must be built between the intellectual worker in the schools and the intellectual workers in other communities. The work of Cornel West provides one place to begin the examination of this project.

CONNECTIONS OF COMMUNITY TO COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

As noted earlier, Flanagan provides three criteria or characteristics for a community: (1) shared final ends, (2) common activities valued for themselves, (3) affection and civic friendship among participants (1991, p. 129). These three characteristics can also be seen as a framework for a community of inquiry. As Splitter and Sharp (In Progress) state:

We will explain how the classroom can be transformed into a community of inquiry founded on dialogue, trust and respect for sound thinking, whose members — typically, students and teachers — establish procedures for sound thinking, good judgement and reasonable behavior (p. 3).

The final end of a community of inquiry can be seen as the establishment of sound thinking, good judgement and reasonableness. Common activities valued for themselves are "dialogue, trust and respect for sound thinking." Community of Inquiry, like community writ large, becomes both a goal to be attained and a model for obtaining the goal.

Splitter and Sharp (In Progress) argue that the procedures outlined above will enable children, as present and future world citizens, to think through unsettled issues associated with their own schooling, the society at large and the global community. This sounds to me like the beginnings of affection and civic friendship, one of the characteristics of Flanagan's community. If Flanagan's definition of community works as a working definition of a community of inquiry than West's characteristics of a prophetic voice might form another set of connections between community and community of inquiry.

CONCLUSION

The point of this nascent exploration of community and community of inquiry is to firmly connect educators with other intellectual worker. All too often teachers and other educators see themselves as laboring alone at best, and many times as working against the tide — forced to do the work left undone by parents and society, by the communities in which we live and work. By connecting the intellectual work within communities to the work of communities of inquiry, I hope to build a bridge, not only between the intellectual worker within communities of inquiry, but also between individuals and groups working for a common purpose outside of education with the hope of establishing civic friendships outside our narrower communities.

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