An Outsider's Sociology of Self

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I. INTRODUCTION

When I was ten or eleven and in the midst of reading one of my then favorite authors of fiction, I came across a particular passage which I found interesting. In this passage, one of the characters responds to a second character’s emphatic declaration that she (the second character) does not belong to a community. The first character’s response is as follows:

Impossible. Every person is defined by the communities she belongs to and the ones she doesn’t belong to. I am this and this and this, but definitely not that and that and that. All your definitions are negative. I could make an infinite list of the things you are not. But a person who really believes she doesn’t belong to any community at all invariably kills herself, either by killing her body or by giving up her identity and going mad. (Card 16)

The passage disturbed me because it seemed to describe me rather accurately. I felt for the bulk of my life that there is no community I can say with certainty that I belong to. At the time, I decided to write it off as simply an aspect of the plot of a fictional novel (and a fantastical one at that). I was convinced that, even if some people might define themselves by their communities, the fact that I did not meant most people did not either.

As I grew older, and began to read more academic works and less fiction, I...
came to realize that this passage more accurately described reality than I had realized. Reading works of sociology, psychology, history, etc., I learned that almost invariably people across historical time and space are able to more clearly define themselves by the various communities to which they belong than I. A typical comment on communities by one scholar aptly describes what is taken as a more or less universal truth in human society: “[M]ost importantly, where I stand and (metaphorical) lenses through which I look have a great deal to do with the communities to which I belong... Every human community shares and cherishes certain assumptions, traditions, expectations, anxieties, and so forth, which encourage its members to construe reality in particular ways...” (Wright 36, “People of God”). Those who don’t, end up like F. Scott Fitzgerald: “Rather than determining for himself how he might most fulfillingly interact with people to suit his needs, he allowed someone else to dictate the fabric of his relationships... For years, too he had been self-absorbed. Consequently, he knew nothing about what was going on in the world... Fitzgerald believed he had lost his identity and his soul” (De-Salvo 96-7). My conversations with others bore out the impression I gleaned from reading. I began to develop a personal working model of how simple communities evolved, and how individuals tend to develop within communities. In other words, I began to define for myself personal conceptions of the inner workings and development of macro- and micro-cosmic social realities. I discovered that people throughout history and in modern times invariably do define themselves by their communities, beginning with their most intimate community, but that I did not seem to fit into this model.

II. DEFINING THE NEIGHBORHOOD: FUNCTION, DYNAMICS, AND ORGANIZATION

In order to demonstrate how communities, or relationship networks, have defined and continue to define individual identities, an examination of these networks is necessary. Prior to the industrial revolution, the model (which persists to this day in some parts of the world) for the most intimate community, what I will call the Primary Relationship Network, was relatively simple. The Primary Relationship Network was the Neighborhood.

I should begin first by defining exactly what I mean by Neighborhood, as it is the term I use to describe the most intimate community in the past wherein each individual’s initial conception of Self develops. “Neighborhood” is not used here as simply a cluster of houses in a suburb which happen to be near to one another, nor as apartment complexes in a city. That is the neighborhood (lowercased), while the Neighborhood is something that has not survived, for the most part, beyond the industrial revolution.

The use of Neighborhood here is somewhat close to Gemeinschaft as defined by Tonnies: “Alles vertraute, heimliche, ausschliesschliche Zusammenleben (so finden wir) wird als Leben in Gemeinschaft verstanden1” (4). However, the Neighborhood is not just any private life of those living together. Before industrialization, people’s Neighbors were far from random. Instead, large families and kinship groups tended to make up the Neighborhood.

The term Neighborhood, then, as used here, means a carefully organized small community of people, many of whom are related, who can easily define themselves in their relationship to the Neighborhood.

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1 All familiar, private, exclusive living together, so we find, is understood as life in community.
to such an extent that it might seem almost isolationist to those living after the effects of industrialization. At the center of this community is the family.

The smallest and most basic unit within society has always been, and largely continues to be, the family. So vital are familial ties to the make-up of societies that the vast majority of historical pre-urban or agrarian communities have an organizational structure and interpersonal relational network which revolves around “blood ties.” This is true not merely of tribal or clan-based societies but equally of medieval European peasantry, or Jewish villages under Hellenic supremacy, or modern day Arab life in remote Middle Eastern communities. Generally, although not exclusively, outside the spheres of urban life, and especially (where it exists) among the economically disadvantaged strata of macrosociety, family literally is the community. As a given culture gains in coherence and complexity, social systems cease to be nearly exclusively based on clan-like networks of blood and marital relationships, but families remain (and this is true even of the modern West) as the basic unit of society wherein indoctrination into cultural norms occurs.

The reasons for this ubiquitous existence of social reliance on families for maintaining communal stability and integrity are manifold, but two reasons stand out as significant. First, given that familial relations, particularly between mother and child, are natural aspects of human nature, only advanced societies have the ability to fashion complex social institutions, such as boarding schools, necessary to supplant parental influence on children. Even when this is possible, it is seldom desirable (save for specific purposes, primarily political but occasionally religious) both for economic reasons, and for the inability of such institutions to adequately produce “model” members of society. The bulk of social learning occurs during childhood, the period in which the child begins to engage in egocentric speech, discover the generalized other, and take on others’ roles. The amount of behavior and cognitive modification needed by children make parents, who can provide these more consistently and with a far more personal interest than any institution, typically far superior to any available alternative.

Second, more important than the countless norms and taboos which children are required to learn is the development in these children of empathetic relationships. Moral systems based on opprobrium can encourage behavior modification independent of civil authority, but only when communal members truly “care” for and identify with other communal members can social cooperation and self-sacrifice occur. It is the extension of natural empathy between a child and his family to the community as a whole which enables social existence at all. The empathetic ties allow participants to engage in joint action by conferring to each individual sets of meanings, enabling them to bring to every interaction an interpretive framework, itself an outgrowth of each individual’s social understanding of their community and their place within it.

Clan-based society may serve here as a demonstrative paradigm. The loyalties of each member are arranged in an ever-expanding pattern of concentric circles. At the center is the immediate family, followed by circles of gradually lessening blood or marital ties until finally the entire clan (even to some extent the undesirables) is contained within the final circle. The clan thus functionally serves as an extended family. The natural emotional and empathetic ties of a member to those within the innermost circle exist, albeit to a lesser degree, between the member and those in any other circle. The Self of each member is formed on the basis of where that member fits in the community. Let me use a few native tribes as an
example here:

Among the planting tribes—the Hopi, Zuñi, and other Pueblo dwellers—life is organized around the rich and complex ceremonies of their masked gods. These are elaborate rites in which the whole community [italics added] participates, scheduled according to a religious calendar and conducted by societies of trained priests… In such a society there is little room for individual play. There is a rigid relationship not only of the individual to his fellows, but also of village life to the calendric cycle… (Campbell 230)

III. THE NEIGHBORHOOD IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

I would like to give a few more concrete examples of how the Neighborhood, or community, has been understood throughout history. Obviously, I can’t cover all of human history or society, so I will choose a few examples which I think are significant.

Whenever I think of “neighbor,” or “neighborhood,” often the first thing that comes to my mind (coming as I do from a Catholic background) is the saying “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Although many would identify Jesus as the originator of this apothegm, it does in fact predate him. According to The Oxford Annotated Bible With Apocrypha, Leviticus 19:18 states, “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself…” The word for “neighbor” in this passage is רַע (pronounced ray-ah). It is better translated as “companion” or “friend,” whereas קב (pronounced kaw-robe) means neighbor, or kinsfolk, and comes from the Hebrew word meaning to draw near or approach. By Jesus’ time, the Hebrew bible had been translated into a Greek version known as the Septuagint, and the Greek translation of neighbor in the Septuagint (πρόσωπον) is closer to the second Hebrew definition given above, and means “those near you.” This is also the word used in the New Testament where Jesus repeats the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

The command in Leviticus quoted above was a command from the Hebrew God, and communal life and functioning were perhaps the most important aspects of ancient Jewish society. A Neighborhood generally consisted of an entire small village, wherein large families lived in close proximity, and everyone knew everybody else. By Jesus’ time, the Shema, perhaps the center of the Jewish faith and a frequently repeated prayer, was often paired in Jewish minds with the command from Leviticus to love one’s neighbor (Wright 305, “Victory of God”). This demonstrates how central to Jewish life the community, and the social rules that dominated it, were. Every individual found her or his place within that community, and defined herself or himself by that placement. It is also why one facet of Jesus’ teachings made him so radical in his day: his redefining of neighborly ties.

In a world where family identity counted for a good deal more than in today’s individualized western culture, the attitude Jesus was urging would result in the disciple [of Jesus] effectively denying his or her own basic existence… Jesus, therefore, challenged his followers to sit loose to one of the major symbols of the Jewish worldview (which corresponded, of course, to the similar major symbol in many non-Jewish worldviews). Contemporary western individualism has, perhaps, made Jesus’ sayings about the family look less striking
than they were. (Wright 402-403, “Victory of God”)

Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh in particular have documented how important community was in ancient Israel and their detailed study demonstrates the close system of kinship groups that predominated. Individualism was virtually non-existent; rather, each individual saw himself or herself as a member first and foremost of a Neighborhood. Ancient Jewish communal organization can be compared with that of the later Middle East given below, and it was hardly unique in the area:

In the Mediterranean world, both ancient and modern...[,] what one trusts, relies upon, and contributes to willingly is one’s extended family, the primary safety net in peasant society. Ancient Mediterranean society was largely a society of “dyadic personality,” where one’s identity was formed and maintained in relation to other individuals in one’s social unit—the usual unit being the extended family. (Meier 67)

During Jesus’ day, the Mediterranean world was dominated by Rome. The Roman Empire began with Augustus and its formal founding is given as 27 BCE. Rome had been a republic since approximately 509 BCE. Although of course momentous cultural changes occurred over such a long period, one social factor remained a constant: that of the importance of the Neighborhood.

The Neighborhood in Rome centered around the gens, a clan-like family structure headed by the pater familias, who dominated over his wife, children, his children’s respective families, his slaves, and their families. Rome itself was in many ways a larger version of the clan dynamics of the gens. Interestingly enough, this modeling of the city on the home and family was true for ancient Greece as well, where the oikos (household) was a smaller version of the polis (city). All of Roman life, from the religious cults to marriage and child-rearing revolved around the gens. So much importance was given to this institution that the head, the pater familias, was granted almost absolute control (patria potestas) which even included power over life and death of those within his gens (Fantham et al. 227). In Rome, as in Judea, the Neighborhood is the backbone of society, and despite Rome’s cosmopolitan nature, there again each individual found identity only through the Neighborhood.

Not all of these Neighborhoods revolved around family, however. Until Christianity became dominant in the late fourth and fifth centuries, it divided family circles. This followed the example of Jesus, shown above. In place of family, the new Neighborhood revolved around religion, and was bound just as tightly:

From the start, Paul’s letters had abounded in the language of “family” and a brotherhood, supported by his luxurious use of compound verbs, formed with the prefix “together.” This language was not entirely novel. In the papyri, pagans, too, address each other as “brother”: Christians, however, combined this language with a tighter control on their group... This tightly guarded “brotherhood” can be contrasted with the cult societies...of the Iobacchic group at Athens. Whereas pagan trade societies and most of their religious groups segregated the sexes among their membership, Christians included men and women alike... [and] even admitted slaves of pagan masters. (Fox 324-325)
Christianity was not a unique religion in its familial divisiveness.

Ancient pre-Islamic Arabia was organized around familial clans (سار). Like the examples above, kinship and community (جالية) dominated life. Muhammad and his followers, at least initially, severed those ties. One example from A. Guillaume is particularly interesting. Muhammad’s clan was known as the Quraysh. Like most of those he encountered, they were largely unwilling to follow his call to worship Allah. During the third and final battle with his clan, one of the Quraysh, Amr, challenged the Muslims to send out a single warrior for hand-to-hand combat. Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law Ali answered the challenge. Ali was not just related to Muhammad, however. He was also the nephew of Amr. Amr, valuing family above all, refused to dismount to engage in combat, saying “O son of my brother, I do not want to kill you.” The ties of Islam, though, triumphed over those of family. Ali attacked and killed his uncle (455). So powerful was his identity wrapped around his religious belief, that his ties to his religious community triumphed over anything else. Once Islam had conquered Arabia, familial ties returned as the basis for Neighborhood organization, strengthened now by Islamic brotherhood.

IV. THE NEIGHBORHOOD IN EUROPE

The ties of the Neighborhood in Europe did not cease with the fall of Rome. As Christianity spread with the conversion of Constantine, and whole families began to consider themselves Christian, the need to redefine the Neighborhood in terms of religion rather than family became unnecessary. As Christianity extended across Europe, the tightly knit units which formed the Neighborhood added Christianity as a new self-identity wherein the Neighborhood could become even more cohesive than before. However, those tribes which were converted to Christianity were no strangers to the concept of the Neighborhood. Indeed, they had their own words to describe the Neighborhood and its inhabitants which were virtually identical to the Hellenic, early Italic, and Hebraic.

The translation of parts of the Bible into Gothic provides an interesting view of the transmission of concepts like Neighborhood from the older vocabularies which formed the Bible to those that of the Germanic tribes. The Gothic Bishop Wulfila (c. 311-383) was responsible for converting large numbers of the Germanic tribe known as the Goths to Christianity. In order to facilitate this, he translated the Bible into their native tongue, and his translation survives as virtually our only record for the Gothic language, itself the oldest Germanic language we have any evidence for.

The word used to translate in the NT is πλησιον the weak masculine “nehwundja” from “nehw” the adverb meaning “nearby” (Lambdin 158). What is interesting is how close the Gothic word is to the word it is translating, which comes from a very different language group (though both are Indo-European). Both of them refer to those living nearby. The concept of Neighborhood was very familiar to the Goths, whose clan-based networks of kin already provided ready identification with the “neighbor” described in the Old and New Testament.

Other Germanic tribes possessed very similar words for the exact same concept. In Old Icelandic, the word neighborhood (“naborinnbuth”) comes from the word meaning “near, akin, closely related” (“naborinn”). In Anglo-Saxon, the historian Bede writes of “a house for sick men” in the neighborhood in which “it was the custom to carry in those who were ill and those who were near to death, and minister there to them together” (“Waes ðær in neaweste untrumra monna hus, in þæm heora þeaw
wæs þat heo ða untrumran ond ða ðe æt 
forðore wæron inlædan sceoldon, ond him 
þær ætsonne þegnian”), illustrating that 
for these people as well, the concept of a 
closely knit group living together was far 
from foreign (Mitchell and Robinson 215-
216). The vocabulary of the Germanic tribes 
suggests that long before Christianity they 
had a concept of Neighborhood which pro-
vided a framework wherein the commands 
in the Bible could be readily understood. 
Members of these tribes, like the peoples of 
the ancient Mediterranean, based their per-
sonal identity on their position within the 
Neighborhood.

To an extent which can hardly be 
exaggerated, peasant life was 
shaped and sustained by custom 
and communal routine… Social re-
lationships within the village were 
regulated by norms which, though 
they varied from village to village, 
had always the sanction of tradition 
and were regarded as inviola-
ble…The position of the peasant in 
the old agricultural society was 
much strengthened, too, by the fact 
that —just like the noble— he 
passed his life firmly embedded in 
a group of kindred. The large fami-
ly to which a peasant belonged con-
sisted of blood-relatives by male 
and female descent and their 
spouses, all of them bound together 
by their ties with the head of the 
group… The network of social rela-
tionships into which a peasant was 
born was so strong and was taken 
so much for granted that it preclud-
ed any very radical disorientation. 
(Cohn 55-56)

During the Middle Ages, after Chris-
tianity had spread across Europe, the 
Neighborhood (at least for the bulk of 
the population) took the form of small villages. 
In these villages, the concept of Neighbor-
hood as Primary Relationship Network can be clearly seen.

V. THE REMNANTS OF THE 
NEIGHBORHOOD IN MODERN 
TIMES

The older model of Primary Relation-
ship Networks exists even today in some 
parts of the world, often where the effects 
of modern technological revolutions are 
not felt. Kenneth Bailey is a scholar who 
specializes in biblical studies, and was at 
one time Chairman of the Biblical Depart-
ment at the Near Eastern School of Theol-
ogy in Beirut. He has also spent decades 
living in various small Middle Eastern 
peasant villages in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, 
and Iraq as a missionary. Bailey has used 
his expertise in Biblical Studies in combina-
tion with his in-depth knowledge of Mid-
dle Eastern peasant culture to give a fresh 
examination of New Testament scholarship 
and bring a new light to New Testament ex-
egesis and hermeneutics:

In the south of Egypt, in the moun-
tains of Lebanon, and in the isolat-
ed communities of upper Syria and 
Iraq, there are peasant communities 
which have lived in remarkable iso-
lation from the rest of the world. It 
is not only their isolation that has 
enabled them to preserve ancient 
ways of life, however, but also that 
they regard changelessness as be-
ing of the highest value…This iden-
tity of value and changelessness has 
maintained itself in Middle Eastern 
peasant society through the centu-
ries. Today, the finest compliment 
for a gentlemen in the village is 
‘Hafiz al-taqalid’ (preserver of the 
customs)... Many villages are not 
connected to the outside world by 
any road. Access is on foot or by 
donkey. There is a town crier and a
village weaver. Doors of streets are closed at night. A colloquial Arabic is spoken, which is sprinkled with Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, and even Akkadian words. (Bailey 30-31)

For my purposes, Bailey’s work is important for his description of communal life within the villages he resided. His greatest contributions to biblical studies have centered around two aspects: how communal life in the Middle East can shed greater light on New Testament parabolic exegesis and how communal oral traditions in the modern Middle East might provide a model for oral transmission and composition of the Jesus tradition. Both of these aspects are relevant for my developing concept of the Neighborhood. In his book Poet and Peasant (intended mainly for specialists) and later in Through Peasant Eyes (designed for the common reader), Bailey discusses in great detail parables from Luke. By applying his experience and knowledge of Middle Eastern peasant communal life, he not only provides a unique exegesis of the Lukan parables but more importantly (for my purposes) illuminates how closely knit and fundamentally vital to cultural existence the Neighborhood is for these villages. Two examples of his work will suffice.

In his exegesis of the parable of “The Friend at Midnight,” Bailey provides some stark examples of the centrality of the Neighborhood in Middle Eastern villages.

The crucial element in this portion of the parable [Lk 11:5-6] is that the guest is the guest of the community [italics in original], not just the individual. This is reflected even in the complimentary language extended to his guest. He is told, “You have honored our village [italics in original], never, “You have honored me.” Thus, the community is responsible for his entertainment. The guest must leave the village with a good feeling about the hospitality of the village as a community. (Bailey 122)

Bailey then proceeds to explain various communal codes, such as the highly developed system of borrowing, which exist both in the modern villages he resided in and over the past millennia in the Middle East, and their relevancy to the parable. Fundamental to all these are the close-knit bonds of kinship which provide the basis for social and cultural existence in Middle Eastern peasant life. The Neighborhood is all, and every individual forms his identity from belonging to it.

My second example is taken from the well-known parable “The Prodigal Son.” In Luke 15:22-24 the father states:

[Quickly bring a robe, the most important, and put it on him, and give him a ring for his finger and put shoes on [his] feet, and carry the fattened calf, sacrifice [it], and having eaten we will rejoice that this my son was dead, and has come back to life, he was lost, and is found.]

Bailey speaks of

...the extraordinary honor that is extended to the son by the slaughter of such a large animal. This size feast requires over a hundred people in attendance to eat the animal. A calf is slaughtered for the mar-
riage of the eldest son or the visit of the governor to the province, or some such occasion... The purpose of such a banquet includes a desire to reconcile the boy to the whole [italics in original] community. (Bailey 186-187)

Later, Bailey writes, “As soon as the father decides to butcher a calf and thus decides to invite most, if not all, of the village, all attention in the village is focused on the father’s house” (Bailey 193). Using his own experience and also referencing older Middle Eastern literature, Bailey shows that in Middle Eastern culture the violation of social norms by the Prodigal Son is a concern of the entire Neighborhood.

Almost identical aspects of communal life can be found elsewhere in Asia. In his essay on the caste system in India, Kudryavstev documents a system of expanding concentric circles of communities in which each Indian locates themselves:

The horizontal intracaste ties are primarily those of consanguinity and kinship. If these relationships are arranged in an order of increasing magnitude, that is, from the smallest unit to the largest, the resultant series would roughly resemble the following: (1) individual family, (2) a small group or related families of the kula or khandan type, (3) larger associations of relatives (for example, thok or biradari), (4) higher exogamous units (for example, gotra or got), (5) an amalgamation of several units into an endogamous “marriage network,” (6) endogamous sub-caste, and (7) the caste proper. (Kudryavstev 40)

The smaller groups exist generally in the same village, but it is important to note that, “the different castes in a village cannot be related by blood because of the very nature of the caste organization. Accordingly, they carry on mutual relations as fellow villagers or neighbors. The vertical ties and entities are, therefore, predominately those of neighbors, both within a particular village and among different villages” (Kudryavstev 40). These villages, or Neigh-
horhoods, formed the predominant social structure in rural India.

The primary task of the village community was to control its membership... It is well known that it was not easy to escape from the village community. It was even more difficult for a stranger to be admitted to the community or allowed to settle in an Indian village. Among other things, the community, together with the self-govern-
ing caste organizations, saw that tradition was adhered to in the family and marriage relations. The community also watched the conduct of its members in day-to-day life. It controlled the observance of the routine rites and holidays. It arbitrated property and other con-
flicts, punished offenders of law and tradition, and organized and conducted all sorts of collective and public works in the village. (Kudryavstev 43)

In other words, the Neighborhood in rural India was central to social life as anywhere else in the world, and individuals defined themselves by their placement within this social system.
VI. THE RADICAL CHANGE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The reality of the strength of the Neighborhood existed throughout the conversion of Europe to Christianity, and through numerous social upheavals. Technology, however, changed the structure of the Primary Relationship Network for good. This change was brought about initially by the arrival of the industrial revolution:

The industrial revolution began in England and other parts of Europe in the late seventeenth century... Technological innovations like the steam engine, the railroad, the mechanization of the textile industry, and new processes for making steel and mining coal were accompanied by equally important innovations in social institutions... For the first time in human history, the market became the dominant institution of society. (Kornblum 170).

It was this growth of the market that ultimately broke up the Neighborhood. The agrarian society of the Middle Ages was everywhere being transformed by technologies. Peasants began to travel away from their villages where strong groups of kinship had held sway for centuries, and they journeyed to the growing cities to seek employment in new burgeoning markets. The railroad allowed travel in a way never previously possible. "The business firm or corporation replaced the family, the manor, and the guild as the dominant economic institution. Rural people, displaced from the land, began selling their labor for wages in the cities" (Kornblum 170). The villages began more and more to be replaced by towns, and towns by cities, as the old model for the Neighborhood began to break apart, and with it the form of social solidarity and sense of community that had been present for centuries.

This loss of the Neighborhood has been referred to by some sociologist as "community lost":

Durkheim (1964), Lawrence (1930), Morgan (1957), and Scherer (1972), for example, associate the decline of sense of community with the rise of industrialism. This development, they believe, brought about not only the decline of the rural village, homogeneous social arrangements, and the opportunity to maintain a sense of personal efficacy, but also fostered the growth of a mobile society, the anonymity of city living, and functional as opposed to personal interactions. (Glynn 342)

The erosion of the older forms of the Neighborhood gave way to the sociological theory of "community lost" (White and Guest 240-1). This theory, which many sociologists from Tonnies onward have subscribed to, asserts that the destruction of the Neighborhood as described above has meant a loss of community in general which has not (and will not) be regained (Tonnies, White and Guest 240-1). "For much of the world’s population, especially the industrialized West, the small, face-to-face community is vanishing into the pages of history... As a result of... technological developments... contemporary life is a swirling sea of social relations" (Gergen 412). Life in modern society has irreparably separated from the close-knit communities of the past. The documentary film Running Out of Time examines the fast-past lifestyle of the modern world. New technology, new goals, new drives, a smaller world, and little time for relationships leaves no room for the Neighborhood: "Once upon a time,’ we might well begin, social life presented itself in stable and predictable forms. Roles belonged to the theatre, not to ordinary routine social existence where men knew their
parts and therefore did not reflect upon taking them” (Heine 47). As Heine notes, and as is shown in Running out of Time, the modern world no longer has the “stable” social life of the Neighborhood it once did.

Other theorists, while acknowledging that the old Neighborhood model of intimate community (Gemeinschaft) has indeed been lost, maintain that intimate community itself has not been lost but has changed. This theory has been called “community transformed” (White and Guest 241-2).

According to this theory, the loss of the traditional Neighborhood has not meant a loss of community, but rather changes to the Primary Relationship Network that are often positive. One example is the ability of people in an urban environment to form voluntary ties, rather than prescribed ones, with other people in the community. Where the Neighborhood bonds of kinship were largely mandatory, now the vast majority of relationships are, up to a point, by choice. True, one cannot necessarily choose within a given job with whom one works with, but there is at least potentially a great variety of available jobs. One proponent of the “community transformed” theory is C.S. Fischer:

Fischer’s subcultural theory implies that the diversity of urban life actually enhances the number of social ties, especially those of what might be described as a voluntaristic nature, where the individual has a great deal of freedom in choosing associates as opposed to ties of kinship, where social relationships may sometimes be “forced” by social and normative obligations. Certainly, the theory suggests that the proportion of all voluntaristic ties increase at the expense of “traditional” nonvoluntaristic ties such as those based on kinship. (White and Guest 241)

Fischer is not the only one to propose that the community was not “lost” but “transformed” by urbanization and technology: “Finke, Guest, and Stark particularly emphasize the hypothesis that urban populations should have more social ties than rural areas, especially those with a voluntaristic focus” (White and Guest 242). Again: “[We have] also shown that urban life is transformed in the nature of ties. Not so much by the number of kinship ties, which seem to be relatively ubiquitous across settlement type, but by a shift toward the importance of what might be perceived as voluntaristic types of ties” (White and Guest 256). So although the social ties within the community are changed from that of the older Neighborhood model, they are perhaps better in that they are more voluntary. This is not the only way in which technology has transformed community ties.

VII. ONLINE COMMUNITIES

It is nearly impossible for one who uses computers not to have heard of online communities such as Facebook and Myspace. These are only two of many ways through which people can maintain social relationships with others who may be miles away without leaving the comfort of their home. These people never need to even meet. These communities, called variously “virtual communities,” “network communities,” and “online communities,” really are communities which have “many relationships... with the physical world” (Cindio, Fiorella De, et al). Couples meet online and stay together for years. Friends and family keep in contact via Myspace or Facebook. Various forums cater to groups of people sharing specific interests. In other words, there are potentially thousands of communities, and millions of very real social relationships, which would not exist without technology. “Without referent or necessary
commitment to the ‘physically real,’ online communications allow participants to construct new places, new social roles, and personally meaningful identities” (Waskul 121). These online communities allow the creation of cyberselves (Waskul 119-128). To say that technology has destroyed the Neighborhood might be true, but it has allowed numerous other types of communities, sometimes quite intimate ones, to flourish in its place.

VIII. EXPLORING SELF DEFINITION ACHIEVED THROUGH MODERN PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP NETWORKS

Technology also shows us through media how relationship networks define the Self. In the film The Breakfast Club, the characters are all teenagers whose selves have been entirely defined by their respective Primary Relationship Networks, which in this case are really “cliques.” The “jock” received his sense of Self from his “jock” friends and teammates, the “princess” received her sense of Self from her friends, the “brain” from his, and so on. The tensions each character experiences in her or his social group are very similar to those described by Patricia and Peter Adler in their essay on preadolescent cliques, the only difference being the ages of the children. The Adlers’ description of the popular clique would be very familiar to the “princess” in The Breakfast Club: “Popular clique members were sensitive to their social position... Maintaining their membership in the popular crowd and at the highest rank within it took concerted effort” (Adler and Adler 257, “Cliques”). During a day of detention, each comes to realize how far they have allowed their respective communities to define them, and how similar they are. By the end of the film, each one has joined a new social network: the Breakfast Club.

In film Awakenings, the character played by Robert Deniro (Leonard) awakes from a 30-year catatonic state to find his whole world changed. Unfortunately, the treatment that awakened him begins to fail. In a touching scene towards the end of the movie, one of his care-givers reports Deniro’s desire to hide his increasingly violent spasms from other patients who have received the same treatment for the same condition. These patients have become Leonard’s Primary Relationship Network. Facing a dire medical situation, one of Leonard’s central concerns is his primary community. Interestingly enough, Leonard’s experiences in the film correspond in many ways to Erving Goffman’s description of the “moral career” of inpatients in psychiatric wards: “The world view of a group functions to sustain its members and expectedly provides them with a self-justifying definition of their own situation and a prejudiced view of non-members, in this case, doctors, nurses, attendants, and relatives” (Goffman 356). The doctor and nurses, belonging to different social networks which not only give them different identities, but furthermore limit their ability to understand who their patients really are, also have a prejudiced view of non-members (in this case, patients). In the film, the treatment team was unable to see Leonard as a person capable even of taking a walk by himself.

Janet Frame, a suicidal patient who was admitted to a psychiatric ward, was given hundreds of debilitating electroshock treatments and nearly received a lobotomy which would have forever altered her personality (Desalvo 158). The only thing that spared her was the superintendent of the hospital discovering that she had been published (Desalvo 158). Had the superintendent not discovered this, Frame would have received the operation, though nothing would have changed making her less mentally healthy and therefore more in need of the surgery. Only the discovery of
Frame’s publication allowed the superintendent to see her as someone who could potentially belong to his own social network, and therefore as a person, and not a patient.

The experience of Leonard’s mother in *Awakenings* is very much like the experiences described in the article “Caring For and About the Mentally Ill” by David A. Karp. One of the mothers quoted in the article could easily have come from Leonard’s mother: “I mean, I tried to bargain with God, ‘Take my life, fix my kid’s.’ To this day, if God said to me, ‘will you come with me now if I make them all happy and straightened out and productive and they will be all right?’ I’ll go, ‘Yes! Gladly!’” (Karp 230).

The media is also an instrument which reinforces the power of community to determine a sense of self: “Much of what we know and understand about others outside our community—who they are, what they value, indeed, what is happening in the broader society—is filtered through the distorted lens of the media… [i]ndeed, media may have become a significant part of the generalized other…” (Milkie 52; emphasis added). Interestingly enough, the media actually creates a media self, or public self, for those icons whose community becomes in some sense everyone with a television (Adler and Adler 131-2, “Glorified Self”). In the film *Billy Elliot*, Billy is a child of a working class English mining family. His immediate family forms the nucleus of his Primary Relationship Network, but his working class neighbors are also members of his primary community. This community has certain ideas concerning exactly what is and what is not appropriate for young boys to do. Billy is interested in ballet, an activity that definitely falls into the “not appropriate” category. Billy and his family all must come to terms with their identities, formed by their community’s ideas of suitability, and challenged by Billy’s new interest.

The Neighborhood which oriented around kinships groups and relationships of a more or less mandatory nature is for the most part extinct. It has been replaced with a different type of community, one where ties of a voluntaristic nature have been moved to the forefront. I call this type, for want of a better term, a Voluntary Neighborhood. Many of these types of relationships are now made or maintained via the internet. The Voluntary Neighborhood is perhaps less intimate than the older Primary Relationship Network model of the Neighborhood, but it remains an essential component in forming the individual identities of members. Technology has provided new types of communities, putting hundreds of different forms where the single Neighborhood used to be.

Even in modern times, individuals continue to define themselves with reference to their various communities, especially the Voluntary Neighborhood (those voluntary and family ties they find most important). The difference between the most intimate community membership (i.e., the Neighborhood or Voluntary Neighborhood) and membership in other communities may be seen in terms of role involvement: “When involvement is low, role and self are clearly differentiated, the few organismic systems are activated, and the actor expends little effort in enacting the role. When involvement is high, self and role are undifferentiated, the entire organism is activated, and the actor expends a great deal of effort” (Sarbin and Scheibe 12). Either way, people today, as they have always, define themselves in terms of those around them. In an essay on social identity, psychologists Theodore Sarbin and Karl E. Scheibe write:

We begin from the postulate that people’s survival depends on the ability to locate themselves accurately in their various ecologies… Among the various ecologies into which the world may be differenti-
ated is the social ecology or role system. People are constantly faced with the necessity of locating themselves in relation to others. Misplacement of Self in the role system may have embarrassing, perilous, or even fatal consequences. (Sarbin and Scheibe 8)

A great part of the placement of the self is found not in terms of an individual with respect to other individuals but with an individual locating herself or himself in relation to groups: “One of the prime contributions of reference group theory and research has been to demonstrate that individual self-valuations vary over time as a function of variation in reference groups” (Sarbin and Scheibe 6). The fact that modern communities are far more voluntary than in the past does not make them unimportant: “As we come together to mourn, we reassert our need for community, for having others recognize the magnitude of what we’ve experienced, the emotional journey we’ve traversed” (Desalvo 209).

The family plays an important part in the Voluntary Neighborhood, as it did in the older Neighborhood model. In her essay on her personal experience in receiving a sense of self from family and community, UMass Boston student Verena-Cathérine Niederhöfer draws attention to the level of choice and voluntary ties which make up the modern family (Niederhöfer 140). The whole of the essay is dedicated to the impact family and community make upon a sense of self (Niederhöfer). Even modern dysfunctional families, as SUNY-Oneonta student Ira Omid (pseudonym) shows in a poignant essay depicting personal experience within a large dysfunctional family, are extremely important in the development of Self (Omid).

According to the sociologist George Herbet Mead, “the individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group…” (Mead 35). Mead’s concept of the “generalized other” may be compared to the Primary Relationship Network described above. Another sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley, in agreement with Mead, describes the process whereby a social self is formed as a product of a reflected or looking-glass self:

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it. (Cooley 27)

Such reflections can help or hurt, depending on what is seen. Virginia Woolf described her “looking glass shame,” when she looked “in a mirror and seeing her reflection made her feel worthless” (Desalvo 41). When one’s self esteem is like Woolf’s, every other person can become a mirror wherein self-worthlessness is reflected. On the other side of this reflected self, where each person sees themselves in others, is one’s face, the public self to be displayed to others.

IX. ΠΑΝΞΕΝΟΣ: My Role as an Outsider

Throughout time, whether by the Neighborhood of bygone days, or the Voluntary Neighborhood of today, or even less important communities and networks to which each person belongs, people have defined themselves everywhere by their communities. Having shown this, I am now able to address the issue of my Neighborhood.
I did not have one. Yes, I lived in a house near other houses. All the houses near me had families of various sorts. Yet, unless I contented myself with a physical description—such as houses and places proximal to my own house, describing architecture, flora and fauna, the streets, and so on, stopping at some arbitrary point that for no particular reason I designate as the end of my neighborhood—I cannot say I belong, or have ever belonged, to a Neighborhood.

I moved to Needham in 1985, shortly before turning two. My family has not moved since. I could not tell you the names of any member of any family in the houses near my own, even those next to my own. Although for a few years I had a friend or two who lived nearby, these friendships did not survive the third grade. My interaction with what might have conceivably been my neighborhood was virtually nonexistent.

Other members of my family had closer ties to varying degrees, although my brother’s experience was for the most part identical to my own. My mother was intimately involved with the school system, and began a babysitting co-op when we first moved to Needham. She had and continues to have many acquaintances across town of varying degrees of intimacy. My father has none. His social contacts consist mainly of his nuclear family (although both of his parents are deceased), and a small number of fellow employees with whom his involvement extends ever so slightly beyond work. My older sister, like my mother, is a social person, and had a number of school friends growing up, some of whom lived within relatively close proximity. My younger sister found herself in an almost exactly parallel social dynamic. I suppose it would be fair to say that sociable and isolationist personality types in my family are divided along gender lines.

Even taking into account the more extensive network of friends and acquaintances on the female side of my family, I still cannot define any one of us as belonging to a true Neighborhood. There is a distinct lack of unity to the relational network of every member of my family. The various networks not only overlap somewhat rarely, there are also internal inconsistencies and a lack of any coherent pattern or cohesion within each network. For example, none of my sister’s friends were friends with each other. Furthermore, they did not reside in any particular localities but were scattered throughout Needham. They were generally from a middle-class background and were usually Caucasian, but this was only because the vast majority of Needham’s population falls into those demographics. No member of any relational network within my family (or, more specifically, the female side of my family) would be able to identify themselves as members of a social unit that could be defined as a Neighborhood, unless it was separate from my family members.

I lacked even those relational networks of my sisters and mother. I usually had a close friend or two, but occasionally lacked even that. So much have I been separate from the Neighborhood that even its core, the immediate family, ceased to be for me a unified social unit. At fourteen I was sent away from my home. Although I returned almost two years later, I left again at eighteen. I have lived for various periods of times (but never over a year) in over a dozen locations in eastern Massachusetts. I have or have had a friend in almost every town east of Worcester, but few of these friends have ever met each other, and almost all belong to social groups of which I am not a member. They may have their Neighborhoods. I do not.

This absence of any consistent social order by which I might define myself has had a profound impact, both negative and positive, upon my personality and worldview. I believe that the primary human so-
cial system, the family and its extensions (i.e., the Neighborhood) is not only the basis of moral systems, it also forms part of the identity of the individual. Every individual, as I hope I have demonstrated, in part defines herself or himself by the community she or he identifies as her or his own. If one is an American, and a Democrat, and a Patriot’s fan, and a member of the American Psychology Association, all one is really doing is adding larger community circles to the innermost circle of one’s social group. As I illustrated above, I imagine relational networks as a series of expanding concentric circles, with the innermost circle being family and Neighborhood. Unfortunately for me, I find myself in an entirely different paradigm. I don’t have those circles, not even the innermost one. I have a haphazard system of relationships. Not only do I not belong to a Neighborhood, but also even within my nuclear family the bonds are hardly as strong as those within the nucleus of an atom. Even within my home I feel a sense of alienation. My paradigmatic relational system might be illustrated as a number of rapidly appearing and disappearing single lines, with varying shades going from light to dark to represent the strength of the bond. Most of the lines would be quite light, and few last for more than a year. Some are around only for a number of weeks or even days. I find that there are few people, even people I say are close friends, that I would really miss if I were never to see them again. I know this, because more than once I have simply lost contact with someone I had known for years as a close friend, and never really felt a change. This would be the negative aspect of my lack of a Neighborhood.

On the other hand, there are two effects that I believe are positive. The first is that as a result of my inability to see myself really as part of any social group, my innermost circle is capable of extending to humanity, however weak the links might be. There is no group (e.g., national, racial, gender, religious) that is excluded from my expanding concentric circles, because I have none. I think the best way of illustrating this is by using the current, and very controversial, war in Iraq. I frequently find myself engaged in discussion over the war with a variety of people, and the outlook I most often find has a basis in the war’s benefits in relation to the United States. I love this country, but only because it represents the political and economic system that is the closest to what I believe is ideal in the world (not that America is anywhere near perfect). I do not identify with the U.S. enough to care more about its interests than those of Iraq. Problems in Iraq are no less important to me than problems in America, because Iraq is no farther from home than America. In other words, I find myself better able than most of those I meet to look at bigger pictures, and to look outside the interests of a particular group, because I have a hard time identifying myself with any one of them. Everyone else must at times engage in borderwork when they come to the edge of their network boundaries; I have none.

No one, however, can be truly human without attachments. The second aspect I find positive concerning my lack of Neighborhood is my connection to my fiancé. As odd as this may sound, the inability to belong truly to social groups has strengthened my ties to the one person I feel truly attached to. In a way, my innermost circle is simply “us.” This is important, because our relationship is likely to be the beginning of a new nuclear family. Perhaps, from that family, I will learn to belong.
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