

de Tocqueville and the Communities of Heart

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What can we learn through this collaborative program about the nature of a vital community – a community of heart.

During the formative years of North American democracy (1830s), an observant historian from France, Alexander de Tocqueville, wrote about “Habits of the Heart” that exemplified the best of North American communities. This term, “habits of the heart”, was used more recently (1985) by Robert Bellah and his colleagues in their own examination of North American communities.

The Conditions for Habits of the Heart in North American Communities

What conditions seemed to reside at the heart of North American communities (and North American democracy) in 1831. According to de Tocqueville, these are:

1. Equality of opportunity, knowledge and status exist in the community
2. Settings exist in the community for vivid and sustained dialogue
3. Shared interests and reasons of mutual support are to be found in the community
4. Civic associations (non-government community-oriented institutions) are prevalent in the community
5. Emphasis is placed on useful action within the community
6. Emphasis is placed on experience-based action within the community
7. Abiding belief is to be found in the community with regard to human progress and a sense of greater purpose in life

The first four of these conditions might be identified as “habits of the collective heart”, while the last three could be clustered together as “habits of the personal heart.”

Are these conditions still to be found in North American communities? Given the deep polarization that seems to exist now in North American society, can there still be the habits of the collective and personal heart that de Tocqueville identified and celebrated more than 180 years ago? With North American citizens living and working in isolation from one another, how do they effectively address the diverse and critical challenges of their 21st Century communities—ranging from the pollution of local estuaries to decline in the local economy, and from the absence of affordable housing and affordable theater to the health care demands of a graying population? Can North American democracy somehow survive in our contemporary communities?

We believe that all is not lost. There are communities in 21st Century America where the habit of the personal and collective heart are still to be found in abundance. – where de Tocqueville’s North American still exists. As was found by de Tocqueville in the 1830s, much of the distinctive North American spirit of democracy is to be found not in the big

cities, but in small and often remote communities. In many ways, these are “island communities”—not because they are surrounded by water (though some are), but because they are surrounded by land that is sparsely populated. These island communities are usually reached not by boat, but rather by automobile, train or airplane—or even more often today by digital forms of communication.

We reiterate de Tocqueville’s conclusion that habits of the heart are most likely to found in these small and remote communities: the “island community” is more likely to be a “community of heart” than is the case with suburban or urban communities. In making this claim, we join such contemporary observers and commentators on North American life as James Fellows and David Brooks in proposing that the collective, collaborative vitality of North American life is often to be found in these island communities.

This is especially the case when the citizens of these communities are faced with an imminent disaster: a forest fire, flood, opioid epidemic or mass shooting. As one of our colleagues in a small, isolated California community has noted when working on a team helping citizens evacuate from an impending collapse of a nearby dam: “there were no Republicans or Democrats coordinating these efforts and filling these sand bags, there were only concerned neighbors and citizens.” There was only a community of heart that transcended all political, ideological and socio-economic barriers.

While personal and collective habits of the heart are probably most apparent under these stressful conditions, we believe that with careful and appreciative examination, the collaborative spirit also exists in the daily life of these citizens. They have to rely on one another when addressing the challenge of revitalizing the local arts, finding the funds to repair and expand the local library, restoring a local river or constructing a strategic plan for restoration of their local economy.

Unfortunately, their self-reliance often comes at a cost. These communities of heart often work in isolation from other island communities that are facing similar problems. Wheels are reinvented, collective multi-community appeals for public and private funds never get off the ground, and competition between communities rather than cooperation among communities and the sharing of knowledge, resources and interpersonal support doesn’t exist.

Certainly, there are many instances of single-focused, short-term collaborative projects involving multiple communities and their leaders. However, there typically is not a long-term consortium-based structure in place that can be sustained and expanded over many years. We propose that just such a consortium of island communities be established that brings together a small number of these island communities – these communities of heart. This collaborative community program would build on the several conditions first identified by de Tocqueville.

Seven Conditions for a Community of Heart

1. Equality of opportunity, knowledge and status exist in the community
 - a. No one person has all the answers or all the authority

- b. Collective wisdom
- 2. Settings exist in the community for vivid and sustained dialogue
 - a. Meetings in the town square
 - b. "Soap-box" democracy
- 3. Shared interests and reasons of mutual support are to be found in the community
 - a. Self-interest is served by assisting others
 - b. A systems-based understanding of mutual support
- 4. Civic associations (non-government community-oriented institutions) are prevalent in the community
 - a. The great value to be found outside government
 - b. NGO collaborations
- 5. Emphasis is placed on useful action within the community
 - a. Watch and evaluate what I do, not what I say
 - b. Everyone in a small, isolated community sees everything: the front porch
- 6. Emphasis is placed on experience-based action within the community
 - a. Informed action based on experience, not theory
 - b. Show me what you have learned by trying it out
- 7. Abiding belief is to be found in the community with regard to human progress and a sense of greater purpose in life
 - a. A spiritual life (not necessarily religious)
 - b. Commitment based on dedication to a higher principle/purpose