

# Living Room Learning

March-April 1990

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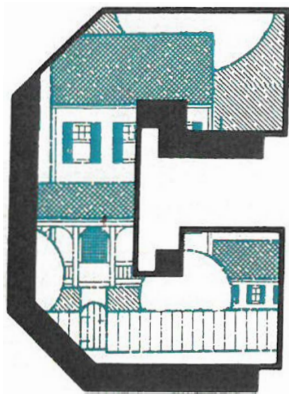
by Frederic A. Brussat

Have we lost our sense of community? If so, what are we missing? When did we last have it? Or has it just changed shape? It's time to take a new look at the role and significance of community in our lives.

In their pathfinding book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (University of California Press, 1985; Perennial, 1986), Robert Bellah and his co-writers lament the fact that selfish individualism and the ethic of materialism has eaten away at the fabric of society and hobbled the ideals of civic

activism and concern for the common good. They also worry about the waning of community, which is defined in the book as "a group of people, who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision-making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it."

Today many people yearn for a return to the traditional type of community represented by the small town. As Richard Lingeman put it in *Small Town America* (Putnam, 1980), it means "a link to place, a sense of belonging, a network of personal, primary ties to others, homogeneity, shared values, and a collective belief in each individual's worth."



As much as we are attracted to the ideals conveyed by these definitions of community, they may not be appropriate or applicable in today's realities. We need to fashion new forms of community for an increasingly heterogeneous and pluralistic world.

John W. Gardner, the founding chairman of Common Cause and cofounder of Independent Sector addresses this challenge in his cogent book *On Leadership* (Free Press, 1989). He believes that "wholeness incorporating diversity" will be the central thrust of the communities of the future. They must be adaptable to change, tolerant of strangers, grounded in a shared culture, and intimate enough to foster fellowship, cultivate trust, and demand loyalty. He argues that thinking seriously about communities and then building them is one of the most important tasks facing people today.

Whether you reside in a rural area, a small town, a suburb, or a large city, it is important to consider the place where you live and the kinds of community you experience there. The hustle and bustle of contemporary life leaves many people with little time for involvement in civic associations. You may find your community at work, at a church or synagogue, charity or cause organization, local union or political organization, bowling league or garden club. Some dual working professionals only have time for a social life at a favorite

vacation spot or a summer place that has been in the family for generations.

One way to get in touch with your ideas about community is to consider your attitudes toward citizenship. Some clarify their preferences by imagining an ideal community; others prefer the challenge of grappling with community problems or uncovering trends. Often it is helpful to look at how others have appreciated community, whether by writing about their sense of place or through images of community conveyed through the media.

Whatever your experience of community, we hope that these book annotations, film references, TV previews, and LRL Ideas will help you see with fresh eyes the role and significance of community in your life.

## COMMUNITY & CITIZENSHIP

Our perception and practice of community has been influenced by the social, political, and psychological transformations of our society. But the idea and the ideal persists.

During the 1960s, the banners of the New Frontier and the Great Society signalled concerted efforts to encourage civic involvement in attacking social problems. For many Americans, participation in the civil rights and antiwar movements was a "school for citizenship." The 1960s, however, were followed by the Me Decade and the Age of Narcissism. Lately, politicians and social activists have deplored a general lack of citizen interest in the common good.

■ Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (Knopf, 1973) was an amazingly prescient study of a phenomenon which has accelerated over the past two decades. The author outlines the various social, political, and psychological transformations of Western society during the 19th century when industrial capitalism and its ally of secularism created a large gap between the

public and private realms. He then notes factors which have contributed to a decline of citizen activism. They include: (1) the deterioration of urban living, (2) the transformation of politics into personality games, (3) the passivity of the public in the face of the media, (4) the emphasis on exclusion within communities, and (5) the widespread turn toward narcissism as the "Protestant Ethic of Modern Times."

■ Murray Bookchin in *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (Sierra Club, 1987) agrees with Sennett that urbanization has led to the diminishment of community and a lack of concern for the public realm. That is why he calls for "a new municipal democracy" which will put the accent on pluralism, civic involvement, and environmental renewal.

■ Amitai Etzioni's *An Immodest Agenda: Rebuilding America Before the Twenty-First Century* (McGraw Hill, 1984) contends that neither the political left nor the right has been able to restore the civility that is needed to bring to life the nation's dwindling spirit. Ethics must precede economics. Once the old values of civic participation and national pride are restored, then America can begin the journey back to greatness.

■ When will citizenship once again be valued? In *Middle American Individualism: The Future of Liberal Democracy* (The Free Press, 1988), Herbert J. Gans argues that "user friendly government" holds the key to societal renewal. When Middle Americans believe that their needs are going to be met, they will become involved in the political process.

■ Charles Murray in his book *In Pursuit of Happiness and Good Government* (Simon & Schuster, 1989) advocates less government and more community activism. He wants to see "little platoons" of citizens in neighborhoods organized to combat poverty, crime, and educational problems.

■ Charles C. Moskos in *A Call to Civic Service: National Service for Country and Community* (Free Press, 1988) goes one step further. He outlines the lineaments of a national program involving one



Movies offer us perspectives on the diversity, nature, and consequences of community life. The examples given here are all available on videocassette. The notation (V&V) after a film means there is a companion Values & Visions Video Guide available. To order, see the Editors' Letter or write: Cultural Information Service, P.O. Box 786, Madison Square Station, New York, NY 10159.

■ *After Hours* (1985, Warner Home Video) is about a word processor from Manhattan's Upper East Side who journeys downtown to Soho for a date and finds himself out of money and at the end of his rope. The film is a darkly comic portrait of an outsider in an alien community who can't find his way home.

■ *At Close Range* (1986, Vestron Video) is a grim drama based on a series of murders in rural Pennsylvania during 1978. It depicts the dire effects of gangland activities on familial and community life in a small town.

■ *Betrayed* (1988, MGM/UA Home Video) looks at the operations of white supremacists in a Midwest farmbelt community. The film explores the violence of racial hatred as a force which eats away at the ideals of the public good.

■ *Chiefs* (1983, New World Video) is set in a small Southern town where a deranged killer has been murdering runaway boys. Although its linchpin is crime, this drama also raises some important points

about political power, police authority, racial prejudice, and community values. (V&V)

■ *Chinatown* (1974, Paramount Home Video) is set in Los Angeles during the 1930s. A small-town private eye unravels a big case which involves graft over valuable land and water rights and the concentration of inordinate power in the hands of a few rich members of the community.

■ *Citizens Band* (1977, Paramount Home Video) depicts how individuals in a small southwestern community are drawn together through their citizens band radios. Despite their differences, they all work together in an effort to locate an old man who has disappeared. (V&V)





## UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES

The search for community aims high but often misses the mark.

Utopian communities have risen and vanished in American culture on a regular



### CITIZENSHIP

"A dynamic education for democracy and citizenship must take place in many settings in our society, and not simply in formal educational institutions or large-scale citizen groups. In the coming years, we need to experiment with a variety of new public forums, civic resource centers, and community commons through which the basic concepts and arts of public life can be relearned by the citizenry." — Harry C. Boyte

The following questions are designed to help you fine-tune your thinking about citizenship and the common good.

■ What does good citizenship mean to you? What do citizens owe each other?

■ How do you respond to those who say that they can have no significant influence on their communities?

■ What social, political, economic, or environmental problems in your area demand civic action?

■ What is your definition of "the common good"? What are a few conflicting images of the common good afoot in your community?

■ What has been your best school for citizenship?

■ Where do you think the "arts of public life" are being practiced most seriously today?

■ What recent books, films, plays, television programs, or songs have given you new insights into citizenship or the common good?

million youth between the ages of 18 and 23. They would learn the ethic of citizenship while working for two years at non-profit associations and public agencies. In times when there is a desperate need for enlightened patriotism and a nonpartisan approach to making the most of youthful idealism, this book offers manna in the wilderness.

■ Probably no one has done more serious writing about community and citizenship than Harry C. Boyte. In ***Community Is Possible: Repairing America's Roots*** (Harper & Row, 1984), he presents examples of how various projects across the country have revitalized public life. In ***Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*** (Harper & Row, 1986), Boyte and Sara M. Evans trace the origin, growth, and impact of major democratic movements in U.S. history by blacks, women, workers, and farmers. The authors salute the efforts of these groups to "learn a vision of the common good in the course of struggling for change." Boyte's ***Common-Wealth: A Return to Citizen Politics*** (Free Press, 1989) traces the roots of active citizenship back to the early days of the Republic. He forecasts that the Information Age, with its emphasis on knowledge, networking, and individual initiative, can be the starting gate for a new age of citizen politics. Let's hope he is right.

basis since Puritan times. Three excellent books explore this multidimensional saga.

■ David E. Shi's ***The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*** (Oxford University Press, 1985) delineates the "shifting cluster of ideas, sentiments and activities" which have been part of the quest for ethical living. Here are the Quakers seeking to promote "Christianity writ plain"; the romantic ideals of the transcendentalists; the gutsy exemplar of simplicity, Henry Thoreau; the Progressive era's back-to-the-land movements and handicraft revivals; the 1960s communal movement; and the short-lived "voluntary simplicity" vision of the 1970s. Although the simple life has not worked as a "societal ethic," it continues to bloom in the minds of many community dreamers.

■ Frances FitzGerald's ***Cities on a Hill: A Journey Through Contemporary American Cultures*** (Simon & Schuster, 1986) presents profiles of four experimental communities which provide their members with security, ideals worth fighting for, and large doses of hope that people can turn their lives around with the help of others.

■ William McCord's ***Voyages to Utopia: From Monastery To Commune—The Search for the Perfect Society in Modern Times*** (Norton, 1990) surveys utopian communities which have sought to give their members a better and nobler life. Some succeeded better than others in resolving the tension between individualism and the rigors of group living. McCord's journey goes from communes to Esalen to religious fellowships to capitalist utopias. Reading this book, one begins to think seriously about how our images of community are always informed by our view of human nature, social change, leadership, sharing, and cooperation.



■ ***Colors*** (1988, Orion Home Video) captures and conveys the disintegration of urban community in Los Angeles as a result of gang warfare. The film makes it clear that the mixture of drug use, guns, and youthful nihilism adds up to a toxic time bomb.

■ ***Country*** (1984, Touchstone Home Video) presents the anguish, stress, and anger of a contemporary family facing foreclosure on their farm. By exploring the plight of these hard-working Americans, the film comments forcefully on the value of community, a love of the land, and the courage to stand up for one's beliefs. (V&V)

■ ***Crisis at Central High*** (1981, Lightning Video) is an insightful dramatization of the clashes between segregationists and integrationists in September 1957 when white schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, were ordered to enroll black students. Through the eyes of Central High's vice principal, we see a community torn apart by racism and antagonism to social policy ordered by the Supreme Court. (V&V)

■ ***Cross Creek*** (1983, HBO Home Video) tells the true story of a determined writer who moves to a backwoods property in Central Florida in order to concentrate on her craft. The film reveals the importance of place and the dynamics of community in a wilderness area. (V&V)

■ ***A Cry in the Dark*** (1989, Warner Home Video) is a chilling docudrama about the wife of a Seventh Day Adventist minister who was charged with the murder of her baby daughter in the Australian outback. The film examines the nightmare of suffering, public exposure, and hatred visited upon this woman and her husband by an intolerant community. (V&V)

■ ***Dirty Dancing*** (1987, Vestron Video) is set at a resort in the Catskills during 1963. When a doctor's daughter gets involved with a street-smart dance instructor, the class tensions of this leisure-time community come to the surface. (V&V)

■ William H. Whyte's **City: Rediscovering the Center** (Doubleday, 1989) celebrates the hugger-mugger of urban streets where pedestrians, food vendors, handbill passers, and business associates all intermix. After 16 years of studying urban environments, Whyte affirms them as places where people "come together face-to-face." That's why he wants to widen sidewalks and make provisions so that sunlight can bounce off buildings and be shared by all.



## COMMUNITY TRENDS

The realities of modern community life have both positive and negative aspects.

Many developments are affecting the shape and durability of community in modern America. Some dark clouds signal bad weather ahead; other trends reveal a degree of flexibility which creates hope for the future. Here are 12 trends to follow.

### 1. Planned Communities and Company Towns

■ In *America II* (Tarcher, 1984), Richard Louv describes what he calls "a shelter revolution" fostered by Sun Belt cities, home-based entrepreneurs, rural home-steading, and buckshot urbanization. One of the most startling developments is planned communities that offer segregation by lifestyle. In exchange for luxury, individuals must give up certain liberties. Louv gives examples of community associations which "wield the kind of control over people's personal lives and tastes that, heretofore, most Americans would never have accepted from any government."

The author also describes experiments in the revival of company towns where work and residence are coupled together.

Louv worries about how these living arrangements will exacerbate the divisions between the information-rich and the information-poor in America. He wonders whether the "control thy neighbor" policies in planned communities and the "circling wagons" approach of company towns may not be antithetical to the traditional ideals of community in the United States.

### 2. Housing To Foster Community

■ In *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work and Family Life* (Norton, 1984), Dolores Hayden hopes to see a different trend in housing. She calls for a coalition of planners, designers, citizens, and political leaders to imagine communities which will blend nurturing and labor, mix private units with collective services, and facilitate economic development for all citizens. The housing of the future should be a setting which encourages civic activism for the good of all.

### 3. The Isolating Effects of Materialism

■ In *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class* (Knopf, 1989), Loren Baritz depicts the changes and surprises confronting middle-

class Americans from World War II to the present. He is especially emphatic on the reconfiguration of the American male and the rise of the working woman. He relates these developments to the loss of community, a situation compounded by the isolating effects of materialism.

### 4. Lifestyles by Zip Codes

■ "Your zip code is no longer just an innocuous invention for moving the mail, it's become a yardstick by which your lifestyle is measured," Michael J. Weiss writes in *The Clustering of America* (Harper & Row, 1989). Addresses determine who belongs in Blue Blood Estates, Young Influentials, or Money and Brains. The delineation of 40 such clusters is just one more indicator that money defines neighborhood.

### 5. Loneliness

■ In *Alone in America: The Search for Companionship* (Harper & Row, 1986), Louise Bernikow profiles individuals who are stranded, including adolescents, men who have trouble making friends, single parents, and unemployed individuals. Bernikow points out how lonely people turn to food, drugs, alcohol, shopping, and other "quick-fix strategies" to deal with their feelings of worthlessness and anxiety. Fortunately, communities of concern are beginning to take this malaise seriously.

### 6. Anger, Frustration and Despair

■ Willard Gaylin's *The Rage Within: Anger in Modern Life* (Simon & Schuster, 1984) charts the widespread outbreak of anger in all precincts of contemporary life. He suggests that self-esteem, pride, and dignity could be restored by the creation of a more equitable social system, family life that nourishes individuals, labor that is fulfilling, and community which engenders social responsibility. Best of all, Gaylin explains how groups can create an "environment of hope" to combat the cycle of anger, frustration, and despair in many towns and cities.



■ *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946, Prism) is the film classic about the give-and-take of community life in a small town. Anyone who wants to consider the meaning of civic pride, class warfare, and shared obligations should see this timeless work of art.

■ *Jean de Florette* and *Manon of the Spring* (1987, Orion Home Video) are French films about the dire effects of small town life when a rich landowner and his nephew deprive a city-born neighbor of water for his land and play a part in his untimely death. The films speak volumes about community intolerance of outsiders.

■ *Local Hero* (1983, Warner Home Video) is about an American businessman from Texas who arrives in a small Scottish fishing village with hopes of convincing the townsfolk to allow his company to build an oil refinery there. As the community considers the offer, all are forced to clarify their ideas and ideals regarding time, money, nature, and progress. (V&V)

■ *Matewan* (1987, Lorimar Home Video) is set during the 1920s in a small West Virginia town where mine owners have come down hard on striking workers. The firm resolve of the community to protect its own is enough to make the hearts of idealists truly sing.

■ *Mean Streets* (1973, Warner Home Video) presents a portrait of small-time hoods in New York City's Little Italy. The film depicts the violence, competitiveness, and strong family ties of the neighborhood.

■ *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988, MCA Home Video) takes place in a small Hispanic town in northern New Mexico where a developer is building a leisure-time resort. After a handyman from Milagro irrigates his half-acre beanfield with water controlled by the developer, a dispute arises which reflects the citizens' conflicting views on the value of progress and tradition. (V&V)



## SPECIAL PLACES

Asked about their community, many people will describe a place.

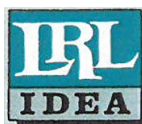
"My most inspiring thought," Wendell Berry once declared, "is that this place, if I am to live well in it, requires and deserves a lifetime of the most careful attention." The specifics of place—the physical surroundings for our activities—are synonymous with community for many people. A feeling of closeness or separation from others, a sense of what is achievable by a group, and our personal comfort in our surroundings are often functions of the environment. Here is a sampling of how some writers have grappled with place.

■ Wendell Berry's **Recollected Essays, 1965-1980** (North Point Press, 1981) draws together selections of his writings about nature and the pleasures which can be gained from "being present" in one's place. After many years of living away from Kentucky, Berry returned and made a conscious decision to know the land where most of his ancestors lived.

■ John Hanson Mitchell's **Ceremonial Time: Fifteen Thousand Years on One Square Mile** (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984) ponders the ecology of Scratch Flat, a tract of land 35 miles west of Boston. Mitchell starts with the revival of plant and animal life after the glacier, then explores the varied changes wrought on the area by its inhabitants during the last 300 years. Although his neighbors may perceive Mitchell as an eccentric, his appreciation of the place where he lives is deeply religious in the fullest sense of the term.

■ Susan Allen Toth's **Blooming: A Small-Town Girlhood** (Little Brown, 1982) is a memoir about growing up in Ames, Iowa, during the 1950s. It captures many different aspects of community in the life of an adolescent girl.

■ Garrison Keillor's **Lake Wobegon Days** (Viking, 1985) offers a glimpse into Everywhere, U.S.A., through its descriptions of an imaginary small town in Minnesota. The foibles of the townsfolk, the pietism,



### PLACE

"Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary." — Edward Abbey

As you consider the place where you live, ask yourself these questions.

■ What do you know about the history of this place?

■ What are the most distinctive features of the place? What makes you most proud of it?

■ Is this a friendly place? Is it progressive or conservative? Are the people who live here tolerant of strangers?

■ What do you have in common with your neighbors? How are you different from them?

■ What recent experience demonstrates the character of the place where you live?

■ If you could live in the ideal place, "the one true home," where would it be? What would it be like?

and the pride of the community are delights to encounter.

■ Carol Bly's **Letters from the Country** (Harper & Row, 1980) is a thought-provoking portrait of both the positive and the negative sides of living in a rural community. She lived in Madison, Minnesota, population 2242.

■ John Herbers' **The New Heartland: America's Flight Beyond the Suburbs and How It Is Changing Our Future** (Times Books, 1986) proclaims low density exurban areas as the favorite new places to live. He believes that North Carolina, a state which has pioneered scattered growth, offers a prototype of America's future.

■ Sue Hubbell's **A Country Year: Living the Questions** (Random House, 1986) offers a surfeit of rural riches. Here is nature lovingly observed on a farm in the Ozark Mountains of southern Missouri.

■ William Least Heat Moon's **Blue Highways: A Journey into America** (Fawcett Crest, 1984) presents portraits of some interesting people and fascinating communities encountered during a 12,000 mile trip along America's backroads.

■ Richard Rhodes's **Farm: A Year in the Life of an American Farmer** (Simon & Schuster, 1989) profiles a Missouri farm family and explores the values of their region of the country—responsibility, cooperation, and fair-mindedness.

■ William Geist's **Toward a Safe and Sane Halloween and Other Tales of Suburbia** (Times Books, 1985) is a collection of articles on topics familiar to anyone who has ever lived in suburbia—Tupperware parties, the stockpiling of *National Geographic* magazines, and local ordinances about garage doors and brightly colored exteriors.

■ **The Soul of America: The People, Places, and Spirit of A Great Nation** (Scribner's, 1986) compiled by the editors of *Esquire* draws together a diverse collection of essays celebrating regionalism. David Halberstam examines high school basketball in Indiana; Tom Wolfe looks at apartments in Manhattan; and Lynn Darling probes the closing of a Pittsburgh steel mill—all illustrating the diversity of communities which exist across America.



■ **Do the Right Thing** (1989, MCA Home Video) is a powerful and disturbing portrait of community life in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant section on a very hot summer day. It provides a scary and sad glimpse of the racial hatred seething just beneath the surface of many communities across the country. (V&V)

■ **End of the Line** (1988, Lorimar Home Video) is about two railroad workers who take decisive action when their company decides to close down operations and move into air freight. The film speaks volumes about the essential link between economics and community.

■ **Fort Apache, The Bronx** (1981, Vestron) is set in the beleaguered South Bronx

of New York City, an area of urban desolation, unemployment, and widespread crime. This gripping drama, based on the real life experiences of two cops who served there, exposes a community torn apart by violence, racism, and despair. (V&V)

■ **Gung Ho** (1986, Paramount Home Video) is a thought-provoking comedy about the Japanese takeover of an auto plant in Pennsylvania. A fascinating study of social change in a community, the film also reveals the contrasts between American and Japanese attitudes toward work, management, and life off the assembly line. (V&V)

■ **High Hopes** (1989, Academy Video) revolves around three couples in contem-

porary London. Here the moral bankruptcy of materialism and the sharp edges of class animosity between the rich and the poor have contributed to the decline of community.

■ **Hoosiers** (1986, HBO Video) is about a small-town high school basketball team who beat all the odds to become Indiana state champions. The film conveys how sports can dominate and control the dynamics of community life.

■ **Housekeeping** (1988, RCA/Columbia Pictures Home Video) probes the struggles of an eccentric woman who is raising her deceased sister's two daughters in a small conservative community. She comes under fire for her unconventional lifestyle. (V&V)

## 7. Malls as Capitals

■ In *The Malling of America: An Inside Look at The Great Consumer Paradise* (Morrow, 1985), William Severini Kowinski explains how these structures have become the "capitals of suburbia" and the salvation of decaying urban areas. There are more malls in America than movie theatres, television stations, or four-year colleges. They are a "mirror held up to contemporary American dreams and a fantasy haven from American nightmares." The enclosure, protection, and control of these habitats make them "a simplified, cleaned-up, Disneyfied fantasy version of Main Street U.S.A." What kind of community life do malls offer? Answer this question, and you'll learn a lot about your view of what's important.

## 8. Gaps

■ In Studs Terkel's *The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream* (Pantheon, 1988), the contradictions sweeping the country are revealed as individuals talk about education, family, work, neighbors, and God. The author, a cultural critic whose oral histories have helped social analysts get a bead on American ideals, is saddened by the "great divide"—the gaps between the haves and the have-nots, the young and the old, blacks and whites, fundamentalists and secularists. It is this divisiveness rather than a common ground which characterizes our communities today.

## 9. Class Warfare

■ In *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (Pantheon, 1989), Barbara Ehrenreich notes: "The professional middle class is an elite that is both estranged from the majority of 'ordinary' people and menaced internally by hedonism and self-indulgence." The result is a chasm between the middle class and the working class—not only in terms of economics but also knowledge. Ehrenreich calls upon professionals to give up participation in this class war and to return to the ideals of community—namely conscience and responsibility.

## 10. Homelessness

■ In *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), Peter Rossi reports on a survey conducted in Chicago which clearly demonstrates the link between economic deprivation and homelessness. Between four to seven million "precariously domiciled" individuals in America are just a step—an illness, disability, unemployment—away from joining the ranks of the growing homeless population. As long as this social problem exists, the idea of the common good remains tarnished.

## 11. The Minimal Self

■ In *The Culture of Narcissism* (Norton, 1979), Christopher Lasch offered a critique of hedonism in America. In *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (Norton, 1984), he analyses the survivor mentality which is defensive, indifferent to others, and oblivious to the past and the hopeful future. The minimal self feels helpless in the face of seemingly insoluble social, political, economic, and environmental problems. Lasch has put his finger on another pathology which is destructive of community.

## 12. Political Talk

■ Political talk has a long tradition in this country. Since the days of the founding fathers, the view has persisted that the health of the nation depends upon an open exchange of ideas, opinions, and perceptions about who we are, what we believe, and what we need to do. In *Rediscovering America's Values* (Ballantine, 1989), Frances Moore Lappe promotes political talk by providing an example of a spirited debate between two individuals with opposing philosophies. The discussion covers freedom, democracy, fairness, wealth, poverty, civil liberties, and community. If more citizens engaged in such dialogues, some of the other trends discussed here could be redirected or averted.



## COMMUNITY UNDER SIEGE SAVED BY OUTSIDER

Cultural myths can shape a community's approach to problems.

An Eden-like community is threatened by an alien force of evil. Ordinary institutions and the sum total of citizen common sense cannot handle the threat.

A superhero arrives from the outside to save the innocent citizens either through redeeming violence or by a psychologically uplifting approach. Eden is restored, and the superhero leaves.

These are the ingredients of what Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence call *The American Monomyth* (Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977). They see this motif working itself out in movies such as *Death Wish* (1974, Paramount Home Video), *Walking Tall* (1973, Lightning Video), *Jaws* (1975, MCA Home Video), and *Mary Poppins* (1964, Walt Disney Home Video).

Jewett and Lawrence are highly critical of this American monomyth. They believe it (1) encourages passivity on the part of



■ *Miss Firecracker* (1989, HBO Video) is set in Yazoo City, a small town in Mississippi. Community values and mores come to the fore in a local beauty contest which is held annually over the Fourth of July holiday.

■ *The Mission* (1986, Warner Home Video) focuses on two priests serving the Guarani Indians in 18th century South America. The survival of the missions as Christian communities is threatened by the pragmatic needs of the Jesuit order, the predatory racism of European settlers, and political pressures from the colonial powers. (V&V)

■ *A Month in the Country* (1988, Lorimar Home Video) focuses on a Yorkshire village where two weary war veterans come for shelter in 1919. This British film explores the ache of loneliness and the anguish of loss in a community where people keep to themselves.

■ *The Navigator* (1989, Trylon) is set in a 14th century English mining village and revolves around a nine-year-old boy who leads his brother and three others on a journey to save the community from the Black Plague. The film explores the metaphysical dimensions of time travel and the role of individualism in a communal setting.

■ *On Valentine's Day* (1986, Lorimar Home Video) looks at the experiences of two newlyweds during 1916 in the small town of Harrison, Texas. Horton Foote's screenplay delves into the obligations of couples to the needy individuals in their neighborhood. (V&V)

■ *Our Town* (1977, Mastervision) is the classic drama about everyday life in Grover's Corners, a small New England town at the turn of the century. It deals with family, love, friendship, marriage, and death.



citizens, (2) refuses to acknowledge the pervasiveness of evil by projecting it on an outward enemy, and (3) promotes fantasies about Edenic resolutions to difficult social problems or disputes. They conclude: "The American monomyth rejects democratic values at a number of critical points. It conveys a pessimism about democratic institutions and public responsibilities, a messianic expectation that society can be redeemed by a single stroke, and an impatience with constitutional processes."



## COMMUNITY

"What life have you if you have not life together? There is no life that is not in community." — T.S. Eliot

Use the following questions as you contemplate your understanding of life in community.

■ What are the main benefits you look for when joining a community? What do you expect to give in return?

■ What has been your most satisfying experience of community? What made it so memorable?

■ What common goals do members of your community share?

■ How does your community express its spirit?

■ What is your community's modus operandi for resolving differences?

■ Does your community successfully balance respect for individuality with the needs of the group? How do you do it?

■ How do you insure that caring, trust, and cooperation are seen as essential ingredients in your community's life?

■ What are the tasks of your community's leaders?

■ What have proven to be the best vehicles of communication within your community and with the outside world?

## TELEVISION PORTRAITS OF COMMUNITY

Two upcoming television events—a mini-series and a weekly series—provide unusual angles on community life.

The term "social ecology" describes the intricate web of relationships, understandings, and obligations which characterize most communities. "Social change" can upset this delicate balance, requiring adjustments across the whole system. This aspect of community life is illustrated in "**Common Ground**," an upcoming CBS mini-series about the Boston school desegregation crisis of the mid-1970s. What began as a modest request by black parents for better schools for their children escalated into a full-scale community dispute. Arguments for neighborhood integrity were matched by imperatives for racial equality.

A Viewer's Guide by Cultural Information Service to "**Common Ground**," which airs on CBS March 25 and 27, 9 - 11 pm ET each evening, is being mailed with this issue of *Living Room Learning*. The questions and exercises examine the nature and meaning of community, its responses to values conflicts and crime, and its perception of the common good. In addition, you may want to consider the relevance of the following thought by Jack Beatty on the nature of community:



"It is a prickly, irrational value, all mixed up with prejudice and xenophobia. Nonetheless, it has undeniable moral dignity and, in our anomic mass society, irreplaceable social utility as an antidote to loneliness, a stay against alienation and despair.

"Equality, too, has great moral authority, but it may be a piece of sentimentality to suppose that conflicts between two such central values can be reconciled by appeal to a higher value that embraces them both. The moral universe is irreducibly pluralistic; within it right will be in conflict with right—equality with community, liberty with equality, justice with culture—from here to eternity. That is why tragedy is a permanent feature of the human condition and why in any conflict of ultimate values the sum of good in the world is diminished."



■ **Pale Rider** (1985, Warner Home Video) refers to an outsider who arrives in a small California gold rush town which is being torn apart by a feud between a mining syndicate and a group of independent prospectors. This western explores community and conflict.

■ **Places in the Heart** (1984, CBS/Fox Video) tells the story of a widow struggling to save her farm during the Depression. The drama reveals how people can work together during terrible times and fashion a community of mutual support. (V&V)

■ **Ragtime** (1981, Paramount Home Video) offers a kaleidoscopic and inventive presentation of a 1906 clash between several New York communities. The film compels viewers to ponder the social, economic, and political changes which affected the character and quality of American life in the early 20th century. (V&V)

■ **River's Edge** (1987, Nelson Entertainment) centers around the murder of a girl by her boyfriend and the reactions of teenagers in the town to his act. This riveting drama provides concrete examples of the ethical erosion which is eating away at the moral fiber of many American communities.

■ **Russkies** (1987, Lorimar Home Video) tells what happens when three young boys in a Key West military community happen upon a stranded Russian sailor. The film illustrates the dangers of bigotry and the potential of people-to-people contacts to ease global tensions.

■ **Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan** (1982, Paramount Home Video) is a science fiction adventure story which accentuates the bonds which tie the Enterprise crew together in a richly developed community. The drama also offers some worthwhile thoughts about the negative energy of revenge and the nobility of sacrifice. (V&V)



**"Twin Peaks"** is a weekly series consisting of a two-hour pilot and seven additional episodes. It is slated for a spring showcase on ABC; watch listings for the debut. It is set in a Northwest sawmill town where a high school beauty queen has been murdered. The cast includes Kyle MacLachlan, Michael Ontkean, Richard Beymer, Lara Flynn Boyle, Peggy Lipton, Jack Nance, Joan Chen, Piper Laurie, and Russ Tamblyn.

"Twin Peaks" has been co-written and co-executive produced by David Lynch, who also directed the pilot and another episode. This is not the first time that Lynch has turned his lens on the dynamics of community. His controversial film *Blue Velvet* (1986, Lorimar Home Video) was set in an archetypal small town where a college student found himself drawn into an exploration of its underside of violence, sex, power, and perversion.

"It's a strange world, isn't it?" one of the characters in *Blue Velvet* says. Yes, and the theme carries over into "Twin Peaks." We are introduced to a series of idiosyncratic characters, including a cop who cries at crime scenes, a nosy secretary who works in the sheriff's office, two menacing teenagers, a sullen biker, the deceased girl's distraught parents and best friend, a nasty trucker, an Oriental woman who owns the sawmill, an unhappily married

gas station owner, a waitress, and an FBI investigator who arrives in town to handle the case and keeps a running account of his activities on his tape recorder.

As the first episode of "Twin Peaks" concludes, we realize there is more going on in this community than meets the eye. There are hints of the homecoming queen's involvement in drugs, flesh magazines, and bondage. The eccentric characters, the awkward dialogue, the abrupt shifts of tone, the unusual camera angles all help us to see that there are forces in our lives which are darker, more dangerous, and more portentous than we thought.

"Twin Peaks" also compels us to consider how we treat outsiders and unusual developments in our communities. In an essay in the Spring 1988 issue of *Whole Earth Review*, Yi-Fu Tuan writes about "Strangers and Strangeness." His concluding thought has direct bearing on this TV portrait of community:

"What a threatening place the world can seem! The human story is one of making the earth and all that live on it less threatening, more supportive, more predictable, and more familiar. . . . In the abstract, we can confront and indeed welcome the strange. Moreover, from experience we know how the strange and the unexpected can give us sudden, joyful infusions of life. But we also fear the strange for obvious

reasons. It disturbs and disrupts; it resists our grasping ego; it frustrates our desire to place, classify, or make consoling forms."



■ **Taxi Driver** (1976, Warner Home Video) is a profoundly disturbing and gritty tale about urban alienation. The film vividly conveys the destructive and violent factors which lie behind the dehumanization of life in big cities.

■ **Tin Men** (1987, Touchstone Home Video) centers on a feud by two Baltimore salesmen in competing firms who try to convince blue-collar families to buy aluminum siding for their homes. This comedy captures the camaraderie of men at work who establish the closest thing to community in their lives. (V&V)

■ **True Stories** (1986, Warner Home Video) is a satirical look at a fictional town in Texas celebrating its 150th anniversary. The film pokes fun at suburban living, shopping mall consumerism, beauty contests, and the worship of progress.

■ **White Mischief** (1988, Nelson Entertainment) focuses on a group of wealthy and jaded English aristocrats living in Kenya during World War II. The film turns into a morality tale with the occurrence of a crime illustrative of the moral rot underlying this community of colonists.

■ **Witness** (1985, Paramount Home Video) is a fascinating film about a Philadelphia detective who is stranded in an isolated Amish community which eschews the conveniences of the modern world. The film reveals some of the pluses and minuses of the simple life where group solidarity is preferred over individualism.

■ **The Women of Brewster Place** (1989, J2 Communications) revolves around seven black women who live in an urban tenement on a walled-off street. Just when their friendships are developing into a broader sense of community, a violent act results in tragedy, and the women join together to confront the barriers—real and symbolic—in their lives. (V&V)