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FOREWORD

The word community is one of those terms that is so widely used in modern parlance that its significance has been obscured, or its meaning taken for granted. In *Coming Home* Cheryl Charles and Bob Samples invite us to reinvest the word with meaning and to consider its importance in our daily lives and society in general.

Cheryl Charles and Bob Samples bring many perspectives to this reflection on community, but perhaps most important is their attempt to show the congruence between the ecology of non-human communities and human communities. Also important is the development of a set of clearly stated and developed principles for the development and maintenance of communities, combined with a number of activities, placed throughout the book as guides for reflection and means of synthesis for the reader. In a real sense, the principles outlined here provide the basis for developing a curriculum for community building and articulate an agenda for skill development by those who wish to seriously engage in it.

This book will be a useful addition to the libraries of those who are interested in community planning, public participation, and organizational development. I hope it will serve as a springboard for the development of educational and action programs focused on equipping communities for renewal and reinvention.

Milton McClaren, Ph.D.
Emeritus Professor of Education,
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia
Adjunct Professor, Organizational Leadership and Learning,
Royal Roads University, Victoria, B.C.

INTRODUCTION

These are turbulent times. There is so much suffering in the world. Terrorism brings fear and tragedy. Natural disasters uproot and kill. Human cruelty brings death, starvation and emotional scars. Divisions of wealth and access to resources continue to undermine confidence and escalate conflict. These are not new challenges. There are some powerful differences, however, in contrast with challenges in times past. The rate at which change is occurring, fueled by new technologies; the accumulating effects of those changes; and the force with which the news of those changes and their impact is brought to us through current communications media—this combination is bringing these changes and challenges into the view and consciousness of most people on Earth, every day. There is little respite, there is much to grieve and worry about, even as there is much to celebrate. There is good news in the midst of the suffering. People throughout the world are taking action—sometimes bold, sometimes quiet—to bring kindness and good works to life.

So what do we do? How do we create the remedies and viable possibilities for actions that will work to solve these enormous problems? How do we celebrate and perpetuate the actions that serve to nourish and heal? That is what this book is about.

We begin by establishing the context—that is, why is it important to be thinking about the health of communities? It is important because healthy communities are the foundation for peace in the world. They inspire and sustain, and make possible a future of promise for generations to come. While our experience is principally in the United States, many of these concepts are applicable to other settings.



*Why is it important
to be thinking
about the health of communities?*

*Because healthy communities
are the foundation
for peace in the world.*

Our purpose is to inform thinking about contemporary communities and to encourage ways of thinking that tend to result in peaceful, healthy and sustainable communities over time. Our bias is clear. We believe that the human vision has slipped far from nature and the natural systems that once embraced us. We have gotten used to describing our concerns and looking for solutions while leaving nature's successful models out of the discussion. This lack of intimacy with nature's guiding principles affects the health of communities at all levels—personally and collectively.

Creativity is essential as an element in fostering healthy communities, and creativity in turn depends upon consciousness. Consciousness is also the foundation for facilitating a multiplier effect in which a critical mass of people thinking creatively about the health of communities puts that creativity to work through their consciousness in service. The book is intended to affirm how the creative process can inform consciousness and in turn facilitate a new sense of community for the 21st century.

We don't pretend to have answers, but we do offer direction. These observations, insights and suggestions come out of our life's work and our shared commitment to creating a peaceful, healthy and sustainable future—now and for generations to come. It is a time for "coming home."

Cheryl Charles

Bob Samples

Santa Fe, New Mexico

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We hope that you will make this book a personal friend, that it will invite you to think about things you care about, to learn things about yourself in new ways, to be inspired to take actions that will serve you and all around you. We hope that reading the book and interacting with its concepts will be like time spent with a nourishing companion in conversation and exploration, support and encouragement. We hope it will inspire the dreamer in you, and support the doer in you. We hope it is among the voices that brings you to a new peace and balance in your life—at home with yourself, at home in your surroundings, at home with others, at home with the work we all must do to keep the world at peace for generations to come. We wrote long ago, “Earth Is Home to Us All—Share It Responsibly.” We still believe it, and we cherish the notion that it takes many of us to engage in the process of “coming home” before it will work for the whole.

We have written the book with the intent that any reader could pick it up, read for a while, make some notes, try some things, and come back to it over and over. Read it through once, taking the time to use your journal, to take breaks for yourself, and to reflect on what is changing in your life. Think about the conversation the voices in this book bring to you in your life, as a form of ongoing, highly personal, dialogue.

Once you have experienced the whole of the book, we hope you will return to it again and again—reading your notes, trying activities again, talking with others about the ideas, and putting the concepts to work in your life. Think of it as a personal notebook, a resource that can grow and change with you over time.

Both of us are note-takers when we read. We long ago got over the stigma that it was somehow wrong to mark the pages of a book with our own notes and comments. In fact, we've decided that underlining, turning down pages, writing notes in the margins, and making sketches along the way are all ways to help us make a book a friend. It becomes easy to come back to an idea, to remember our initial response, to reinforce the idea and our interactions with it, to make it our own in that it integrates with our own consciousness. Leaving a visual trail is a way to serve the heart and the mind.

So you will find a lot of white space in these pages. Part of that is tied to our own sense of the aesthetic. Another part has to do with our commitment to learning. Leaving white space allows for sketches and notes that you can write along the way, and find again with ease, because the space encourages that process.

In addition to feeling comfortable writing within the pages of this book, making it a collaborative process as you interact with it, and, by extension, with us, we hope you will also keep a personal journal—one of those bound books with blank pages on which you can write, draw, paste artifacts, and explore even more in the privacy of your own journal's environment.

You will find that we suggest numerous activities along the way. We suggest, in addition to writing on the pages, that you use a journal throughout the process of reading this book. Ideally, this would be a journal that you begin just as you start the book, and that you keep solely for the purpose of your notes, observations and insights. If you take that approach, you will end up with two tangible records of your experiences—what you include in your journal, and what our book becomes in your hands as you personalize it.

Each section of the book begins with a quote—often by someone we know, who has inspired us, likely mentored us at times in our lives, and is a friend both personally and in our shared commitment to ideas that matter. We typically define a few terms, using standard references, as a way to establish some context for the major concepts each chapter is exploring. We set the stage for why we think a set of ideas is important. We provide our perspective so you have a sense of what we have learned and think is meaningful about a subject. We include suggested activities, so that you can take a few minutes or longer to do something with the ideas—to stretch, interact with others, and document your own insights to learn from at the moment, and reflect on later as well. We encourage you to use your journal. We encourage you to get outside, in the living world, as a physical way to reconnect with what we have always called “the first classroom.” And throughout, we encourage you to take or leave what you find, to agree or disagree. Make this experience your own.



PART ONE

THE CONTEXT

Each of the memories I have picked up along the way represents an encounter with a place and a time that goes beyond the particular but might have been invisible without the contrasts of strangeness, for one is forced by cultural difference to question assumptions and struggle for active understanding.

Mary Catherine Bateson

Peripheral Visions:

Learning Along the Way

We live in times of extraordinary change, immersed in oceans of information, with immense mobility, technological tools and access to resources. At the same time, the gap between those of the greatest financial resources and wealth and those of the least is raising tensions and debate throughout the world.

What is needed is a whole view of the characteristics of healthy communities and a greater awareness of those processes that can be employed to facilitate the health of communities. Communities need people with the skills and conviction to assist in developing leadership, practicing collaboration, and achieving peaceful results. Those attributes exist within each of us, and can be nourished among us all.

We begin with a belief that there is a need to disseminate information about the characteristics of healthy communities and processes for achieving them. We believe that with such information, encouragement to practice the arts of community building, and the inspiration that comes from personal experience, people throughout the world can put the ideas to work, in their own ways.

For our purposes in this book, healthy communities have many attributes, which we describe in detail in the chapters that follow. Healthy communities are cultural and natural systems where life and learning are nourished and the actions of members enable a peaceful and sustainable future. A healthy community functions by the laws of both culture and nature. Healthy communities embrace the integrity of choice and change while honoring the need for continuity and wholeness.



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cultural and natural systems
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The Patterns that Connect

It was Mary Catherine Bateson's father, Gregory Bateson, who said "context is a pattern through time." The context within which we live in the world today is unlike any other, and yet it is rich in pattern. To make sense of these times, we need to be discerning. We need to be able to read the patterns. We need to be able to see the strange in the familiar, and the familiar in the strange. This form of recognizing patterns, and changes in the relationships within patterns, is fundamental to the creative process. Reading the patterns will inform our thinking, and help to give us the skills, insights, and experiences that will help us—each of us—contribute to the health of environments, beginning within ourselves, in our relationships, and in our ways of being members of communities of all kinds.

Bateson claimed that, for us to recognize change, we have to see a difference in the relationships between the parts and the patterns that these relationships express. As the pattern varies in context, relationships can be detected.

In natural systems, patterns are expressed within the context of the overall characteristics of an ecosystem. Organisms live in relationship to others. Each individual organism has relationships with others of its own kind, and with a suite of different life forms. Patterns may change in response to changes in climate, disease, reproduction rates, food supplies and other characteristics of habitat, and the general balance of interactions among the parts of any ecosystem.

Context becomes the combined expression of patterns and relationships. Patterns govern the continuity of life systems. Relationships determine day-to-day interactions. Both are subject to change. Sometimes the environment imposes changes. Other times the change is born from within the self-regulating characteristics of life itself.

In natural systems, changes in patterns are most often emergent—that is, they are created from forces within the system rather than from outside influences. Emergent change accompanies the uninterrupted functioning of a system.

Humans often exercise another form of change—imposed change. Imposed change is directed at a system in an effort to alter or enhance its function.

Many of us today try to manage change and some of us think of ourselves as “change agents.” We believe that we will be far more effective participants in any setting—family, business, community, and planetary—if we understand and appreciate both forms of change. We urge an approach that recognizes emergent change within the context of natural systems, and uses great restraint in exercising imposed change.

Organisms live within a specific kind of context—a habitat. For wildlife, suitable habitats are those environments in which food, water, shelter and space are effectively arranged in a pattern that is conducive to the species’ survival. Habitats are patterns of living relationships. Some relationships are explicit, like when a bluebird eats an insect or a hawk eats a vole. Other relationships are more subtle, like the effects of changes in rain-

fall cycles and the timing of the sexual maturation of sea turtles. Organisms must fit within and participate in the process of creating patterns within habitats in order to survive. All life forms must adapt to changes in time—that is, in Bateson’s terms—to adapt to the context of patterns through time. If relationships change, so do the patterns, and vice versa. With a change in pattern, we have a change in context. If we don’t, as humans, pay attention to these changes—and our tendencies to affect them—there can be an accumulation of unintended consequences with sometimes disastrous results.

Here is an example of how things can go wrong as a result of imposed change.

We once watched a small family of mongooses forage in the shrubbery below a balcony at a resort hotel on the big island of Hawaii. Before mongooses were turned into tourists in the Hawaiian islands, they were native to India. Mongooses are successful creatures, resourceful in reproduction and adaptation. Living for centuries in India, they were known to kill and eat snakes. This attribute was appreciated by the Indian people. The colonizing British, observing the mongoose’s affinity for killing and eating snakes, were also appreciative.

It was not long before some people decided that if mongooses killed snakes successfully in India, they could do so in other geographic settings. This is how the mongoose came to be what we humans might call a reluctant tourist. The mongoose fit appropriately within the context of its native environment in India, just as all native plants and animals fit appropriately within the context of their habitats throughout the world.

Unfortunately, in this case, a decision was made to take the mongoose to other places in the world in which the British had colonies. The British colonialists concluded that the fear of snakes held by many British citizens could be reduced by taking the snake-killing mongooses abroad and enlisting them in the Queen's service. And so, the mongoose began to travel the world under a British passport. One place the mongoose was introduced was Hawaii. The introduction of nonnative species is always a form of imposed change, and nearly always brings a host of unintended consequences. In this case, the results were compounded by the fact that Hawaii had never had snakes.

Parts of a context, when taken separately from the pattern in which they exist, tend not to transfer well. The mongoose was only a single element in a pattern that had developed over an extremely long period of time. This became evident when the mongoose began to adapt to its new environment. Mongooses, it seems, like to eat many things in addition to snakes—including eggs, young birds, small rodents, and insects. Opportunistic, as are most predators, the mongooses began eating a wide variety of eggs—chicken, duck, songbird and even turtle. The impact has been devastating—particularly on the native species.

Humans make decisions. To make them without understanding the context can have, as did the mongoose decision, wide-ranging and sometimes horrific consequences. Now, Hawaii's ecosystem is turned upside down. Species, once at home, are displaced and even made extinct.



Activity: Journaling and Soft Eyes

Throughout this book, we encourage the use of a personal journal for reflections and observations. One helpful approach comes from *The Artist's Way at Work*, by Mark Bryan, Julia Cameron and Catherine Allen. It encourages readers to write each morning—literally writing no more than three pages. It is a personally reflective and head-clearing way to start the day. The book also encourages “time-outs” of the sort where, once a week, you do something refreshing and pleasant for yourself, alone, just for you. We encourage both activities, remembering that healthy communities begin with healthy individuals—and that process begins by taking care of your self.

With that as an introduction, find yourself a bound book with blank pages—they are sold in bookstores, stationery stores, and a variety of other places. Pick one that pleases you in terms of touch, size, and overall aesthetic. Put your name and today's date in the book. Take a few minutes to write a one-page introduction—write about why you decided to read *Coming Home*, and what you hope to learn and accomplish as a result.

One way to begin to discern patterns begins with what we call “soft eyes and hard eyes.” Go outside, with your journal in hand. Ideally, pick a place that you enjoy visually. Find a spot to stand in which you can see 180 degrees with ease. Take a few moments to scan from left to right, looking in detail at the environment and its contents. That process is looking with “hard eyes.” Take your journal and write a few notes about what you see.

Now, do the same thing, but shift your vision so that you are looking at the big picture—that is, scan for the whole of what you are seeing and how it fits together. Forget about the detail and visually experience the whole of the setting, using the technique again of moving from left to right. This time you are using “soft eyes.”

Write a few notes to yourself about the effect you experience. What are the characteristics of the view you see with soft eyes? With hard eyes? Are there differences? Similarities? Both skills are useful. We often see only the parts, and not the whole.

Complex Adaptive Systems

One of the sources of insight available to us is in the study of complex adaptive systems. Not yet a science, it is an emerging discipline. An interdisciplinary group of scientists and scholars from diverse fields has been working for the past decade to identify and understand the connections within systems of many different kinds—the patterns that connect—in whole and systemic ways in order to make predictions and understand phenomena more fully. In this case, technology has helped. Computing capacities are part of the process, especially when predictive software is applied to determine the characteristics of the complex adaptive systems.

Why does this matter? Because the work is fostering an awareness of the connections that exist among us all, and is generating insights about a variety of attributes of communities of all kinds. Concepts related to human behavior under stress, human resilience, accommodation to change and evolutionary tendencies are emerging with more clarity than has previously been the case as a result of the work in this field of study.