

Only Connect!

By Lewis Nightingale

I've belonged to many communities. And yet, the feelings that go along with community – connection, fellowship, support, belonging – have often been missing for me. So I wonder about the difference between being in community and the feeling of community. Now, more than at any other time in my life, I feel a strong sense of connection. What's different now from the way things were before?

In his book *Cat's Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut makes the distinction between meaningful associations (he calls them "karasses") and trumped-up groups devised to create an us vs. them mentality ("granfal-loons"). Granfal-loons are Republicans, Giants fans, bottoms, and white people. Karasses are made up of the people with whom you truly connect and travel through life. They are the real communities that join us together and give us the sense of true belonging we seek.

As gay men, it's easy for us to seek fellowship through identification with groups like bears, leather, drag, and so on. But this fractionalization might be merely fool's gold – just the illusion of belonging, not the real connection that comes from time spent with people who support, nurture and encourage our best selves. Joining a group, while a great way to combat isolation, isn't the answer in and of itself. It's very appealing to be with others just like us. And there certainly are rewarding connections to be found at poolsides, street fairs and Billy gatherings. But I have found that true community comes after first finding and experiencing it in yourself, which makes it easier to identify when you have it with other people.

I've been a joiner all my life. SDS in college, est in New York, Japanese Buddhist cells, Louise Hay healing circles, the 15 Association. But after awhile, these commu-

nities – whether spiritual, political, social or sexual – didn't give me the sense of belonging they'd promised or I'd expected. Like many people, I've known well the feeling of aloneness within groups. And I've sought the outward signs of inclusion – jargon, style, attitude -- in place of real connection.

Male, Jewish, middle-class – these are worlds I inhabit easily. I lived in a commune for a year during college. I've always voted Democrat. Coming out was the first time I actively sought community, and I found relief in its very normalcy, looking around my first gay bar and seeing regular guys much like myself. Looking back now on New York life in the 70s, I see how much and how little I felt part of those halcyon days. I am very glad to still be around to tell the tales. Yet reading nostalgic novels set in the good old days makes me sad for those people I lost and for what I see now was often a false sense of community centered on dick and dancing.

Crossing into poz land took me to a community that has both diminished and nourished me. My poz identity is strong, and my sense of self is deeply defined by AIDS. When I meet a negative gay man around my age, I am astonished at the different paths we have traveled. With my health and future taken from me, I sought solace in others whose losses mirrored mine. Yet shared health challenges or shortened lifespans have not been enough for me to feel true connection. What seemed like a karass turned out to be a granfalloon. The feeling of well-being from seeing the world from your side of the neg/poz divide may be comforting, but real connection and intimacy isn't something that happens magically by jumping into membership in an affinity group. These groups are places to start

to find others you can connect with; they don't provide community in and of themselves.

Before moving to California in 1996, I lived in Santa Fe for 10 years. I was an advertising agency owner and somewhat public figure, and I enjoyed a life fully engaged in the city's business and social worlds. Going on disability shortly after moving here brought changes and challenges far greater than just the loss of profession or money. I have struggled to find ways to replace the things that work gives: conviviality, collegiality, accomplishment, structure. My search for community has been intensified by what I lost from leaving the world of work. It's hard to get everything a job provides from socializing, learning and volunteering, though I have certainly tried.

Sometime in my early forties, I caught the scent of leathersex and ultimately followed it to San Francisco. Like so many others, I came here to delve deeply into my sexual nature. For awhile, I felt I had found my people and my passion. I was a "hot man," accomplished and in demand. But I soon saw that this path was leading to trouble, and after a few years of edgy excess, I fled to Oakland, relieved to put deep water between me and what I saw as the seductive, dangerous and destructive gay community across the bay.

I cleared out my head, cleaned up my life, and sought connection with Berkeley queers at the Pacific Center. And I looked for volunteer gigs that connected me to groups other than gay men, who made up my entire social life. I studied Chinese at City College, helped new immigrants, and tutored ESL students. My forays into San Francisco were limited to medical appointments, cultural events and occasional visits with friends. Each time I

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hurried back across the bridge, relieved to have resisted the Sirens' call. To me, San Francisco was about pozzness and the sexhunt. Neither seemed like the community I wanted to be part of. After a few years, I felt that the East Bay was where I belonged. But the walls I had erected to feel safe began to confine me.

Four years ago, feeling lonely and isolated, I knew I needed to reconnect to the gay and poz communities, which seemed like the best place for me to find the fellowship and support I craved. I heard about a white-water rafting trip for HIV+ men, so I signed up for a Healing Waters weekend. I frankly found the rafting part scary and cold, but during those two days I met my current partner and two of my best friends. I still volunteer with Healing Waters as a trip cook once or twice a summer.

Two years ago, I decided to devote part of my volunteer time to a gay group, but I resisted AIDS work. I asked my friend Buzz for guidance and he hooked me up with Doug Sebesta and SFGMCI, who told me that Kim Corsaro, publisher of this newspaper, was offering the organization a regular column. I quickly claimed it as my turf.

For the past 18 months, I've been editor of this Sparks column. I've shepherded 28 articles into print, worked closely with 24 writers, helped them tell their stories and encouraged them to speak out about their experiences of community. My life's work has been giving people a voice – as an advertising creative director, a language teacher, an editor, and a volunteer with youth and senior programs. How appropriate and satisfying it has been to be a vehicle for these 24 men to find their own voices and deliver their words. Connecting writers to you, the readers, has been a meaningful experience for me, and made me feel a part of the community discourse here in San Francisco.

Personally, I am delighted to have rekin-

dled my creative spark. Now I've decided to write my own piece, to tell my story and share my experience of community.

Each of us must make his own journey. But deciding that there is no gay community, or that affinity groups are disappointing or divisive, kills the hope and the possibility for real connection. Remain open to new experiences and people, keep moving forward and look for authentic "karasses" instead of being tricked by the trappings of "granfalloon." Find the people who sustain and support you, who provide fun and fellowship. Community is there for all of us.

Six months ago, I moved in with my partner here in San Francisco. It was a big step for us, but also for me, in returning to a city which had wounded and ultimately eluded me the first time I lived here. I had serious reservations about living so close to the Castro – I'm about 10 minutes up the hill – with its lingering associations of the sexhunt. My fears turned out to be overblown. Maybe it's the reduced visibility that comes with age, or my contented coupledness that doesn't crave random adventure, but the Castro feels like the familiar village that gives truth to cliché. Walking down Market Street between errands, running into friends, I'm struck by how at home I feel, how comfortable it is to live in the gayest place on earth. I wonder what has made the difference.

Maybe it's my home that gives me love and belonging. Maybe it's my morning dog walks that make me feel part of a neighborhood scene. Maybe it's my friends who like me for what I like about myself. Perhaps my enthusiasm for farmers' markets, my fascination with all things agricultural, ties me to the earth and the seasons. Maybe it's the intimacy that's been built over the years I've been with the other men in my HIV+ therapy group. Maybe I'm just happy.

Certainly much of my feeling of connection and purpose comes from my

involvement with SFGMCI. As the organization finds its way toward sustainability, many of us are taking more active roles in running its programs and expanding its reach. I'm part of a group that meets monthly to oversee all activities. I'm facilitating a committee of guys who plan and produce regular community forums. Planning these events has been fun and rewarding. And being a volunteer has certainly improved my social life. I'm working with men I like and respect, and true friendships have formed.

I know that my feelings of community – connection, fellowship, support, belonging – don't depend solely on the externals of my life, the attachments I've made and the work I'm doing. They arise from my own sense of how I am in the world. The feeling of community, like the feeling of love, is both specific and transcendent. Feel it in one instance and you feel it throughout your life. There is obviously no one monolithic gay community, but gay men can certainly feel community. These connections form a web that joins us together. E.M. Forster's words in *Howard's End* ring true for me: "Only connect! ... Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die"



Lewis Nightingale edits the Sparks column and urges you to consider sending him an article. If he can do it, so can you. In addition to volunteering with SFGMCI, he tutors ESL students and bakes fabulous desserts. He can be reached at lewgo@sbcglobal.net.