

From the Kitchen

2 March 2011



How far does *our* 'community' extend? In the past, it might have been limited to our village or, more recently, our suburb. This would be overlapped by our extended family and, for many working men, the crowd that gathered after work at the local pub. In the countryside it may have been a collection of farms and the Country Women's Association and in Australia it would also have been indigenous tribes. Some of these communities still exist.

I ask the question because it relates to how we respond to the plight of others during and in the aftermath of disasters – floods, explosions in mines, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, terrorist attacks, civil war, revolution, the sinking of ships or crashing of aircraft.

Timor and Papua New Guinea are geographically closer to Australia than is New Zealand, yet how different is our response to events in these countries? Maybe it is because in the Preamble of the Australian *Constitution* New Zealand is grouped with New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania, Western Australia and South Australia as a colony which may be admitted as a State of the newly formed Commonwealth;¹ and the invitation is still open. Perhaps it has to do with a commonality of language and a shared sense of humour.

Why are we more likely to give money for the victims of an earthquake in New Zealand than those of a similar event in, say, Turkey or Japan? I acknowledge that there are huge differences in attitudes and responses among individuals but I take society's response as reflected in the amount of relief-fundraising and the coverage given in the media.

It is frequently said that we now live in a 'global village'. I do not think this in any way comes from a sense of community with every other person in the world, rather it is an expression of the reach of economies and trade and the amount of travel around the globe. Depending on your source of information, there were almost five billion commercial flights taken in 2007.² Even given that many people make multiple trips each year, that is still a sizable proportion of the world population that has been 'somewhere else'. The question remains: how much do we really care about what happens 'over there', outside our own community (however we may define that)?

We can make a huge fuss about the threatened felling of an 'iconic' tree in our local shopping area while at the same time millions of trees are clear-felled in forests all over the world, often resulting in the permanent displacement, even destruction, of whole communities. For those communities, as for the Aboriginal tribes in Australia, the environment (forest or desert or savannah) formed part of what they identified as community and this included the animals, plants and geographical features.

There are people who feel it keenly when anything untoward happens to any individual anywhere in the world. They would agree with John Donne who, among many other sage contemplations, wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." In the same Meditation³ he wrote, "The bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth."

From this we could surmise that the extent to which we identify our community (how far it extends for us) is an individual matter and it probably has to do with our upbringing, education and moral/spiritual position.

There is a related question: does caring what happens to another person mean that I need to do something to assist them when they are in need? I suggest that, while the two are linked, one cannot automatically lead to the other; we are capable of caring about more people than we could ever assist in any meaningful way. A corollary to this is the notion that by helping even one person in need, we are making the lives of all people better, assuming a connection that binds all of humanity.

There are probably different levels at which we can feel part of different communities. We are born into a community (whether we eventually feel part of it or not) and we move in and out of communities through study, work, travel and, now, the Internet.

We may, however, misunderstand the true meaning of the word: to have something in common – interests, family, experience, knowledge, occupation – or to live under a common set of rules or laws. We can also become part of a community through a shared misfortune or disease. We can stumble into or out of a community. We can feel strongly that we want to get out of a particular community and we can be expelled from a community. Social networking over the Internet can create a sense of community where no community exists (or does it?), and this can also be true at a place of work or through some other activity.

How far any community to which anyone belongs extends, ultimately comes back to the individual: how they identify themselves and to what degree they feel part of that community. Therefore, in some way, each of us creates unique communities and each community may well have as many facets as the individuals who belong to it.

1. the text is available at www.aph.gov.au/senate/general/constitution/preamble.htm (see Article 6)
2. I found this at <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080809072622AARckVv>
3. see www.online-literature.com/donne/409/ for the complete text of Mediation XVII