

Charles L. Woodard, ed. Peril and Promise: Essays on Community in South Dakota and Beyond. Brookings: South Dakota Agricultural Heritage Museum, 2007.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The theme of community is of prime importance in a state like South Dakota, which has been identified as being among the highest states in measures of community, social capital, cooperativeness, and philanthropy. Various factors have been suggested to explain this, including geography, history, ethnicity, religiosity, and low population density, among others. All of them, no doubt, are involved to some extent or other.

A group of about a dozen scholars who teach and work in a variety of disciplines at South Dakota State University or who have a close relationship with the school got together a number of years ago to write essays on community from their own particular perspectives. The project had its inception in a conversation on a drive home to Brookings from a 1999 humanities conference held in Rapid City. English professor Chuck Woodard and historian John Miller were talking about their mutual interest in the subject of community when they decided to enlist some of their colleagues to read and talk about it and perhaps write some essays on the topic from their own disciplinary perspectives. Fortuitously, Robert D. Putnam published his best-selling book Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community several months later, and the newly formed “community group” dove into the subject. When it came time to write their essays, the half dozen or so members of the group invited a like number of their colleagues to join them, and editor Woodard also recruited some of his writer and poet friends, including former poet laureate of the United States Ted Kooser, to contribute.

The result is the book in your hands—a multidisciplinary collection of disparate essays and poems connected only by their intense allegiance to the notion that community matters in people’s lives and is crucial to the quality and success of social relations. Miller’s initial essay argues that “the places we treasure” play a huge role in our happiness and well-being and that communities need to consciously work to enhance the quality of the places where social interactions occur and to create new ones, if necessary. His two essays on the nature of community in Clear Lake, a county seat town in east-central South Dakota, show how circumstances changed between the Depression and World War II years, on the one hand, and the past several decades, on the other, but also how many things have stayed the same.

Nels Granholm, a microbiologist, places human community squarely within the broader biotic community, reminding us that human survival and quality of life depend implicitly upon the health of the land and environment. Community begins, that is, in nature, and it is our responsibility to foster and maintain it. Dennis Bielfeldt, from the perspective of philosophy and religion, carries this analysis a step further, explaining how a philosophical viewpoint and a sense of the divine play important roles in situating us within “the primordial facts of existence” that give meaning and significance to our lives. “Real communication arises from commonality and drives to communion,” he writes.

Mary Haug writes uncommonly well, putting into practice the maxims she taught her writing students in the English Department at SDSU. Growing up in the wide open spaces of Lyman County just west of the Missouri River, she imbibed a profound sense

of the significance of place and environment in shaping people's mindsets and temperaments. From her perch on the roof of the family farm's granary, she could look out over the countryside for miles. Those hours spent alone instilled in her "a love of solitude and an ease with being alone that inhabits me still," she writes. This is an interesting thought in a book about community and suggests that individualism and community are not necessarily in opposition but rather complement each other.

Tribal member and sociologist Elden Lawrence provides unique insight into the thinking of the large Indian community in South Dakota in his essay on "rebuilding the circle." Like Granholm, Bielfeldt, and Haug, he underlines the importance of the land and of nature in establishing a vital communal spirit. He delineates some of the pressures and constraints on community formation and health, starting with federal policies, and urges the importance of blending modern ways and traditional practices to "mend the broken hoop." In her description of the SDSU-Flandreau Indian School Success Academy, MaryJo Benton Lee, another sociologist, provides a case study in how institutions can work practically to promote a sense of community that reaches across racial and ethnic lines. She draws upon the theories of William G. Tierney and the practices of Martin Luther King, Jr., to advocate communities of brotherly love and service to humanity based upon the principle of agape, or "selfless love." In Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam distinguishes between "bonding" community, which characterizes groups that are relatively homogeneous and see eye to eye with each other, and "bridging" community, which reaches across differences and gaps to unite groups that often differ greatly in characteristics and interests. Lee contends that community can thrive amid diversity as well as within tightly knit groups of similar people.

Ruth Harper, a member of the SDSU Counseling Department uses her experience in Linda Hasselstrom's writers retreat to illustrate how community can emerge among groups of like-minded researchers and writers who engage themselves in writing about the subject of community. In this sense, she is reproducing the kind of experience that developed among the authors of Peril and Promise, as they started by reading and discussing a book on community, participated in programs on the subject in Clear Lake, and then set about writing their own essays and poems about it. Several of the members of the community group indicated that this project had been one of the most worthwhile and rewarding experiences of their career at SDSU. Answering questions posed by Harper, Hasselstrom indicates that the people involved in her retreats and collective book projects built strong friendships and became closer and more intimate while working at their tasks. Writing the books and getting feedback from college students and other readers who read them created a collective sense of community transcending time and space. Since the appearance of Peril and Promise, Hasselstrom has published a new book on the theme of community, No Place Like Home: Notes from a Western Life (2009), which provides a nice complement to the SDSU volume.

In her personal memoir of waitressing at "The Lucky B" café, Darla Bielfeldt, a poet, writer, and English teacher, approaches the subject of community indirectly from a literary angle. Anyone who has stepped into a small-town café will recognize some of the characters she describes and the goings-on in her story. She reminds us, as does Garrison Keillor in Lake Wobegon Days and Sinclair Lewis in Main Street, that all is not "sweetness and light" in small towns. Displays of bad or mean behavior coexist there along with kindness and generosity, just as they do everywhere else.

Del Lonowski takes us down a different track in his effort to promote the utility of councils of government. But that is just what you would expect of a professor of political science. He addresses one of the most important and practical issues facing citizens around the state, especially in remoter, less densely populated places: how to support state and local governments as expenses inevitably creep upward and tax revenues soften. For him, community becomes a very practical issue—one of creating workable cooperative schemes in which different groups and governmental units work together to solve concrete problems efficiently, collaboratively, and effectively. In Lonowski's view, councils of government have a lot to offer.

Rural sociologist Meredith Redlin likewise is interested in the practical effects of institutional development in creating rural infrastructure and community-based networks to improve economic welfare and enhance social conditions. She draws upon the famous Goldschmidt study of rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley of California comparing the quality of life engendered by two different kinds of land ownership: large, integrated, corporate units versus small, family-owned and operated farms. Stated succinctly, the Goldschmidt Hypothesis posited that "the most vibrant rural communities are those with strong and secure family farms." This is a lesson widely accepted in South Dakota, but increasing pressures from many sources call into question how long this condition will last.

Finally, Larry Rogers brings the notion of community into the classroom. He and his colleagues in the Department of Education at SDSU worked closely with a number of school districts, with funding from the Annenberg Rural Challenge, to develop ways in which the K-12 curriculum could become more geared to local needs and interests. Clear Lake, Howard, and other towns were spearheads on this project, and the focus upon a locally-based curriculum has continued to be a major thrust in training teachers at SDSU. Central to that philosophy is the assumption that promoting and enhancing the quality of community life is crucial to the development of quality education.

Beyond the essays that constitute the bulk of this volume, editor Woodard and his fellow community group colleagues included poems, photographs, and an annotated list of suggested readings as integral elements of the total package of Peril and Promise. The list of books, in fact, can serve as an excellent guide for more than one course on the subject of community, and the editor and authors hope that readers will be enticed to explore the subject further down those pathways.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Since discussion questions are appended after each essay in the book, it is unnecessary here to provide another long list of them. However, some of the following broad questions might be added for discussion purposes:

1. How important is healthy community to the quality of life in South Dakota and surrounding states?
2. Do you think that a sense of community has been increasing or eroding in recent years?
3. What actions can be taken to improve community spirit in our small towns and cities?

4. What governmental actions can be taken to enhance community? Locally? Statewide? Nationally?
5. Outmigration of young people is a constant theme in the press and in political circles. Is there anything that can be done about this situation? Should we worry about it or is it just a natural development? What, if anything, can be done to counteract it?
6. What disciplines (literature, history, philosophy, biology, sociology, political science, and so forth) do you think have the most to contribute to our understanding of community? Explain.
7. If you had unlimited power and resources, what would you do to promote the sense of community?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND THE EDITOR

Notes on each author are included at the back of the volume.

Editor Charles L. Woodard, a Distinguished Professor of English at South Dakota State University, has been teaching at the school since 1975. He grew up in White, South Dakota, where he played football, basketball, and other sports while attending high school there. After obtaining his bachelor's degree from Dakota State University and his Master's degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, he served as a Marine Corps infantry officer in Vietnam. The dissertation that he wrote to obtain his Ph.D. degree at the University of Oklahoma was on Kiowa novelist and poet N. Scott Momaday. Woodard is the author of Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday (1991) and editor of As Far As I Can See: Contemporary Writing of the Middle Plains (1989). He has edited more than a dozen books, including several volumes written by native writers and books on subjects ranging from country churches and one-room schools to home front stories during America's wars.

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