

Comments by Susan Wright, St. Thomas Church, October 25, 2009

The topic of community causes me to reflect on where I've come from. In her book, Where I Was From, Joan Didion's words resonate:

It would be easy for us to sit back and enjoy the results of the past. But we can't do this. We can't stop and become satisfied and content. We must live up to our heritage, go on to better and greater things...

I grew up in what now seems an idyllic time, in the late '50's and early '60's, in Montclair, New Jersey. The town was my neighborhood. It was a true community as was true of many neighborhoods then. People talked to their neighbors over the back fence. Our next door neighbor from Mississippi made us pralines for Christmas. I knew my town well. I could walk everywhere. I walked to elementary school just down the street and across the park to the junior high. We played in the park and went skating on the pond.

My brothers and I can still name everyone who lived on our street.

This memory shapes my concept of community.

I went to a college, Vassar College, where there was a sense of community. We were the last all-female class and we spent our junior year protesting. We were against the Vietnam War and in favor of moving to Yale.

The college campus became my physical neighborhood. Dormitories instead of houses, walkways instead of streets, open green spaces instead of a park bounded my world. Most importantly, I had friends – friends whom I could trust and count upon. We shared a common educational experience and a sense of community.

Dartmouth drew me in in the same way –as did Hanover. For anyone growing up as I did I imagine Hanover feels familiar.

Like an embrace, the town encircles neighborhoods and the Dartmouth campus.

We can walk from one end of Main Street to the other past its picturesque storefronts to the College green.

Almost everything here is within walking distance: our neighborhoods, libraries, schools, churches, banks, and stores.

This place is one of great natural beauty.

But Hanover is more than a black and white snapshot. In the 30-plus years I've lived here I've developed a deeper understanding of what a community is.

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Community transcends the physical setting. Dynamic and diverse, the people and the local organizations and institutions, not the geography, make this a community.

As the Dartmouth alma mater affirms, “Though ‘round the girdled earth they roam, her spell on them remains.” Witness Dartmouth Night and the bonfire this past Friday when graduates from around the world returned.

I have found the same lifelong devotion to community at St. Thomas, in this church of beauty and fellowship.

What is it that instills a sense of community? It is the sense of belonging that we feel, of some shared values and responsibility.

At Dartmouth I became part of a large and diverse community. I met students from the world over, from ethnic and cultural backgrounds different from mine and I valued this experience.

As the College’s International Student Advisor I learned that students from “international” countries (a word replacing “foreign”) do not necessarily feel part of one international student community simply because they are not from the United States. Not being from the U.S. is about all they have in common. But they did have in common Dartmouth.

My student advising introduced me to students from communities I’d never experienced. I met numbers of African American, Native, and Latino and Latina students participating in a program focusing on academic careers, students whom I would otherwise not have known.

My own sense of community grew stronger by virtue of these student exchanges. Although I did not share a common background with them, I felt a bond –a human bond.

Fifteen years ago I fell ill. I came face to face with the value of community.

The day before the doctor diagnosed my breast cancer I had swum 50 laps. I was in the pink of health. In a flash my world turned upside down.

This happened on the first day of Jim’s acting presidency for then-president James Freedman who ironically was on sabbatical following his chemotherapy for cancer.

Neighbors and friends, family and former classmates all came to my side. The caregivers, the nurses and doctors, at DHMC, treated both my body and my soul. Acquaintances supported me as if they were old friends.

At Dartmouth I had a built in community –from around the world, yet still a community.

Every day I wore a different sports team cap given to me by the Dartmouth players and coaches. I could have opened a flower shop with all the flowers I received.

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A flood of letters and cards cheered me up and gave me hope. One card pictured an elderly woman fit enough to do a leg lift. It hurt me just to look at her. Yet I knew that I would do a leg lift one day again.

The best medicine was the teddy bears people gave me. When I came out of surgery there was a bear named Chester waiting for me on my hospital bed given by people in the office where I worked.

During the course of chemotherapy I became deathly ill from pneumiscystis pneumonia, the protozoan form that kills AIDS patients. An associate brought her young son to my bedside. He gave me his bear named "Friendly" so that I would get better. And I did. (After which I gave him back his beloved bear.)

I shall forever be grateful to the faithful at St. Thomas who added my name to the prayer list.

The community put me under its wing.

In sickness I found community. Acts of human kindness, the goodness of people, these are what I remember about the period of my illness and what make me feel so privileged to be a part of this community.

Community is more than neighborhoods and places where we are from. People who care about each other, people who care about their schools and churches, people who serve for the sake of others –these shape the values that sustain our community.

We have only to look to the murder of two beloved professors, Susanne and Half Zantop, to know what community means in the face of evil.

My husband, Jim, said in his eulogy that even good and strong communities can have bad things happen. What makes them good and strong is how they respond to bad things.

This spring we had the groundbreaking of a campus garden that will mark the good lives of the Zantops for posterity. The communal outpouring of love for Half and Susanne, and for the communities of which they were a part, empowers and inspires.

The meaning of community, all of this, can be summed up by St. Thomas' vision for this parish. The words form a simple calling. They instill a sense of community: "All welcome, no exceptions, to worship, love, serve, and grow."

As one who feels always welcome here, no exceptions, I am thankful for your church. You live up to your heritage. You work to build an everlasting community of fellowship and friendship, of goodness and service, for all.

And you share this with others who are not part of your congregation –from Haiti (where Grace Hill's program is focused) to Hanover. You act with heart and soul.

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This – this is community.

Thank you.