

# The Death and Rebirth of American Community

James Sellers

After twelve years of teaching in a theological school, I had heard more than I wanted to hear about how bad things are. There was, both colleagues and students insisted, no sense of community anymore, either in the corporate life of the school or in America at large. The sense of common existence had lost its conjuring touch over space and had been severely contracted in time. Americans, they said, had neither a sense of continuity and tradition nor a vision of the future. Abandoning the larger dimensions of social and political life, there is nothing left but to fall back upon tiny redoubts of private affiliations.

Theological schools, I was to discover, are still as sheltered from the world as Luther claimed the monasteries were in his time. Only after leaving to teach in a secular university have I had to face the full impact of America's loss of community. My former colleagues and students at least complained about the absence of community and thought themselves the poorer for it. As I now survey the larger canvas, I do not detect this element of regret; one senses, rather, an acceptance of life without wider community—whatever the consequences.

Seven or eight of us in the Rice student center one steamy day formed a discussion group spun off from my “Ethics of the Life Cycle” course. Our assignment was the moral dimensions of the word “responsibility.”

The Attica prison revolt was fresh on our minds, and I asked whether, as members of American society, we should consider ourselves in any way “responsible” for the riot and subsequent loss of life.

“Of course,” came the quick response: One is accountable for anything he can do something about. While we can do more about ourselves and those

closest to us, there is still conceivably something we can do about prison reform—through the electoral process, for example, now that eighteen-year-olds can vote.

What about tragedies not so recent? “Do you feel any responsibility for genocide in Nazi Germany?” Most felt none. A Jewish student expressed passionate concern that we not let such things happen again, but even this expression of responsibility was limited to what we can *do something about*. No young person living today need, by any stretch of conscience, feel himself responsible for past injustices.

“Do you feel any responsibility for slavery or the failures of Reconstruction?” A unanimous no (the one black in the course belonged to another discussion group), then the pale addendum: “Of course, we should do something about racial injustice *today*.”

Today's injustice has no rootage in yesterday, and yesterday has no kinship with us. I argued for a larger view of responsibility that assumes more commonality with both the victims and the perpetrators of the past. Responsibility may go beyond what we have the power to change; it might have to do with a common condition. As a reasonably concrete symbol of all this I cited the American heritage itself, a heritage binding us to each other and in responsibility to the rest of mankind.

What the students did not find incomprehensible in such an argument seemed to them somewhat offensive.

“What do you mean by America, anyway?” asked a bright premedical student. “I share your concern for injustice, but what is this ‘people’ you’re talking about? You seem to think of ‘America’ as an entity of some kind, as a ‘going concern.’” His eyes narrowed inquisitorially. “Do you?”

“Well, gee, I suppose I do.”

“Man, that shows the generation gap. I can’t even imagine what this thing is you’re trying to describe, ‘being a good American.’”

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"But what does 'community' mean to you?"

"It means my friends."

"You said you opposed injustice. . . ."

"What does that have to do with saluting?"

This was the Thursday 1:00 p.m. group, a collection of functionalists, aspiring to be doctors, engineers and geologists. I brought up the question with the 7:00 p.m. group, a smaller parcel of non-pragmatist night people. They agreed with the functionalists. You certainly aren't responsible for someone else's past. And you aren't going to find much, if anything, at the societal or national level to call community. Whatever earlier generations believed about it, this *ousia* or *hypostasis* of "Americanness" now belonged to the category of superstition and priestcraft.

"What is community, then?" I asked.

"It's us right here on Thursday night."

They planned a class party, an expedition to a Greek taverna on the ship channel. What if most members of the class itself, those in the other discussion groups, didn't want to spend the money? "Screw the class—we'll go without them."

At semester's end the group fell apart.

In Jean Anouilh's play *The Traveler Without Luggage*, the veteran Gaston is a shell-shocked amnesiac. When he is presented with the evidence of who he really was, of how cruel he had been in his early life, he prefers to renounce it, to deny that he is Jacques Renaud. He tells Valentine, the sister-in-law who remains in love with him, why he is not coming back:

I am in the act of refusing my past and its personages myself included. Perhaps you are my family, my loves, my true history. Yes, but . . . I refuse you.

To do that, Valentine argues, would be foolish. It would make one a moral monster. "No one can refuse his past. No one can refuse himself." But Gaston replies:

I am no doubt the only man, it is true, to whom destiny will have given the possibility of accomplishing this dream of everyone. I am a man and I can be, if I want, as new as a child! Not to take advantage of such an opportunity would be criminal. I refuse you.

This generation of American youth, like Gaston, has an unusual chance, almost by way of a *deus ex machina*, to reject an unacceptable American past. It can, at least for a while, sit it out, for, unlike earlier generations, it has few bills to pay. Not to take advantage of such an opportunity would be criminal.

For some students the notion of America as community is worse than unsatisfying or meaningless, it is immoral. A young North Dakotan writes to me from Toronto, where he is pursuing graduate studies. Before that he had been in Europe. In all, he has been away from the U.S. for five years and is reluctant to return. America is not worth it. And yet, he

cannot quite get the American experience out of his system, he cannot quite accept the argument that it is somebody else's dirty past we are talking about. Maybe he still wants, he said in his letter, to find some decent way "to admit to being an American." But how can we, he asked, even if we think well of the American heritage, possibly "recover a heritage virtually destroyed during the 60's?" Can the tradition be reclaimed from its recent leaders, or rescued from its captivity to world domination?

The problem, I believe, extends far beyond the students. Among the good, gray regulars of the society there is a serious contraction of what it means to be an American. When patriotism has become a weapon of riot control, it can no longer be a way of realizing what we have in common. The regulars, too, have their enclaves of lesser, more private community. The Elks still exclude blacks. When Southern Baptists gathered in the Astrodome, astronaut James B. Irwin was hailed as the first *Baptist* "to walk the Moon's mountains and valleys, relying on God and the prayers of his church back in Houston," according to a report in the *Houston Chronicle*. In Houston one can purchase, for \$4.95, a set of Swiss Musical Door Chimes that plays "The Eyes of Texas." (Also available in the "Aggie War Hymn.") In America today it is often easier to think of oneself as a San Franciscan, or an Iowan, or a black, or a neo-Confederate, or an IBM man, or a women's liberationist, or a superpatriot. To be simply an American is too complicated.

Perhaps it is true that, during the decade of the sixties, America experienced a drastic, if not fatal, loss of the notion of community. It is a loss characterized by refusing a heritage somehow gone wrong. The result is a falling back upon smaller enclaves for a redefinition of what we mean by community, even by "society." We wish henceforth to fulfill our obligations without running them through the used-up hypostasis of the entity called America.

For some the loss is the beginning of the end. Others call for a new regime to forcibly redeploy the hardheaded values of the past. Still others see it as the prelude to revolution. I think that neither defeatism nor reaction nor revolution can explain what is happening or may happen. A more useful insight is provided by mythology, and specifically by the archaic notion, nearly universal among ancient peoples, of the rites of *initiation*, or puberty rites.

Such rites, which aim to introduce the initiate to "the whole body of the tribe's mythological and cultural traditions," ordinarily begin with an act of rupture. The child or adolescent is separated from his mother, sometimes brutally. The initiate is cut off from his past; he must die to it if he is to emerge in a new identity.

The rite is not focused only on the initiates; the

whole tribe is involved. Although the ceremony marks the entrance of the adolescent into the adult world, there is, for the tribe itself, a movement in the reverse direction: from the present to its own larger rebirth, for, as Mircea Eliade has written in *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, "through the repetition, the reactualization, of the traditional rites, the entire community is regenerated." Thus the tribe returns to its beginnings in the same rite within which the initiate leaves his beginnings to assume a new role.

"Initiation lies at the core of any genuine human life," says Eliade. We all go through cycles of crisis, suffering, loss of identity, deaths and rebirths of meaning. However satisfying one's life may have been, still we are likely at times to be aware of our failures, and to take the view that we have missed what we had set out to do, or betrayed the best that was in us. "In such moments of total crisis, only one hope seems to offer any issue—the hope of beginning life over again. This means, in short, that the man undergoing such a crisis dreams of new, regenerated life, fully realized and significant."

We may accept the evidence of the decline of American community without viewing it as the prelude to apocalypse. America may be undergoing a deep-running *rite of initiation*. It is a movement in both directions. America is an adolescent community ready to die to its recent past so it may enter, at least a little more fully, the adult world of nations. And yet, as young as America is, it is also a morally wasted nation at mid-passage; it must return to its beginnings to experience a rebirth of its constituting purpose.

I am sympathetic with those who think America needs a revolution, but America, I suspect, will never have another political revolution. Although community, in the sense of common fidelity, may seem dead just now, other structural bonds remain strong, the bonds of national business, federal power and middle-class property-holding, for examples. We need a moral revolution, to be sure, but the way to get it is by a change of identity, not by storming the barricades at the Pentagon or G.M.

The current ideologies of revolution do contain myths appropriate to rebirth. The blacks' struggle points directly to one of the fundamental American myths that ought to be, and perhaps is, in process of rebirth: the struggle against despotism. The uprisings of students and women, the agitation of the poor for political power—all these revolutionary currents signify potential resurgence for the meaning of community in America. There is an ironic interaction between death and life, fragmentation and community.

In early American history the main issue between the colonists and Great Britain was not at first the struggle for independence. The issue was the rights of *Englishmen* to govern themselves. Along with the political revolution, these Englishmen in America ex-

perienced a fundamental rite of initiation. The right of self-governance was won, but the winners had to give up the very identity ("Englishmen") that had occasioned the idea of self-governance in the first place. Now they were self-governing, thanks to a revolution, and Americans, thanks to a rite of passage.

The most painful initiation in American history to date was the Civil War. Old notions of who was an American had to be slain, and new ones (imperfectly) born. After that rupture and rebirth, the country took on new roles that persisted down through the 1960's; America as technological hero in victorious struggle with nature, and Uncle Sam as globally puissant.

It is perhaps too early to predict a rebirth of America into a more appropriate, less one-sided identity. Still, there are stirrings, faint traces of new themes and of old themes in new combinations. Among the more instructive of the changing themes is the death and rebirth of the hero in America.

The hero we all knew, and maybe loved, has disappeared in America. Lewis Lapham has inquired into the mindset of contemporary Hollywood movie-makers and laments, among other things, the suppression of heroic figures:

The most successful movies of the past summer, both at the box office and with the New York critics, have to do with rats, lust, greed, and insects. In each instance the evil in question triumphs over the rickety moral defenses of the few characters who even bother to raise tentative questions of conscience. A cockroach can be a hero, and a woman is nearly always a whore ["What Movies Try to Sell Us," *Harper's*, November, 1971].

Lapham suggests that heroes are still possible but that film-makers have chosen, for questionable reasons, not to portray them. The new films, he says, are crass appeals to the under-thirty audience. For commercial reasons they cynically pander "to the worst suspicions of the adolescent mind." Lapham calls for the reappearance of the hero: "A modest hero, certainly, marred by flaws of character, but a figure who might at least suggest occasional aspirations."

But what if the hero is really dead? Perhaps the film-makers are simply reflecting the fact, and can be criticized only for not bringing the hero back as a museum piece. The absence of the hero is notable in other areas of American life as well. Where is yesterday's great-souled, morally robust professional football player? Shouldered aside by players turned playboys, muckrakers and businessmen. In the comics, the captain of industry, another incarnation of the hero in America, has for years been reduced to parody (General Bullmoose) or the palpably archaic (Daddy Warbucks).

I do not, however, think the hero in America has

died; it is, rather, that the heroic identity is undergoing massive change. And for good reasons, for heroes are one-sided, they exist to lead the people through a period of crisis or transition.

For three generations the American hero has been aggressive, masculine and egoistic—a nearly cosmic gladiator figure. He conquers something, or everything: nature, the business world, Hitler, the other team, space. America needed that kind of hero, apparently, to realize its identity (and promise) as an industrial nation.

But no one is more out of date than yesterday's hero, especially when a new crisis occurs. America's crisis today is not that of establishing technological or political hegemony. It is a crisis of interdependence, of living together. It is a crisis of the cities, of the rights of minorities, of the emergence of new nations, of coexistence with other superpowers.

This is not a crisis for Horatio Alger's kind of man. We do not need Commodore Vanderbilt or Theodore Roosevelt or John Wayne, or even JFK standing up to the Russians in West Berlin. If courage was the cardinal virtue of the last heroic age in America, *care* will be that of the next. This is not to say courage need go out of style; Martin Luther King, one of the likely forerunners of the new hero figure, not only preached a gospel of care but demonstrated the courage of caring. The hero who cares will be marked also by fidelity, humility, and a passion for justice.

Signs, both great and small, of impending change are all about us. Long hair on males represents a return to the sexual and anthropological center; a less harsh, one-sided masculinity is now called for. For some time now, boys and men have been able, without embarrassment or real threat to their masculinity, to learn to play the piano and cook and keep house, even to wear "outside wallets." If that is a softer masculinity, it is also a more balanced representation of the human.

The Women's Liberation Movement represents a similar trend toward the center. Women are rightly asking for the end of an era in which they served as maids for gladiators. In an age when caring may be more important than gladiating, women will recover roles at the center of the action.

The old hero must die.

**T**he loss of a sense of larger community in America, then, is real, and it is painful and it leaves us poorer—but perhaps only for a time. In primitive life, loyalty to the tribe was strong and uninterrupted because there were no options, there was nowhere else to go. Myths that led to confidence in the tribe's gods and its destiny drew allegiance not as the best choices but as the fundamental structure of reality to which there were no alternatives. The twentieth century can restore that kind of national community only in such aberrations as Nazism. To the extent that patriotism in America

has sometimes echoed this tribal consciousness, we can welcome an era of lesser allegiance.

No face-to-face community can be healthy, however, if it feels no pull from a wider context. For their own survival, Americans sooner or later must risk again the leap of commitment outward, from private loyalties to the national community and, beyond that, to a renewed moral investment, however risky, in the community of nations.

Of first importance in this movement is salvaging the American myth of the rights of man. The story of human rights must be retold, this time by those who have seen beyond the death throes of its previous tellings. The Declaration of Independence needs to be worked over by a new generation of artists and storytellers. Because its first beneficiaries were mostly of British stock, the nascent American myth had to be wrenched from the ethnocentricity of its origins and established as a saving myth for all of us. But the first solution, left standing until very recently, was to open the myth to anyone who became an honorary WASP. Today we experience a more thorough wrenching; historic renovations have removed Protestant thought control and the King James Bible from the classrooms, have opened the good schools to all, and have begun to bring Catholics, blacks and women into the national imperium on their own terms.

One effect is a more visible "centeredness" in the spirit of minority groups—the recent renaissance of ethnicity, for example. In a longer view, this need not be seen as a reversal but as a potential resuming of the telos of our heritage. The American myth of the rights of man, though it may have been born of a local claim about the "rights of Englishmen," has undergone the transforming power of the rite of initiation and now underwrites a deeper freedom—the freedom to live out the distinctive texture of one's own share of the heritage, be that texture Afro-American, Anglo-Saxon, Franco-Catholic, overall-freak or Wall Street-gray. But self-expression, the American experience tells us, does imply interdependence. Just as there can be no statehood without federalism, so there can be no meaningful newer communities without a renewal of the ties of union.

Half of alienation is believing nothing can be done. Half of restoration is taking up the symbols that will let us believe better of ourselves. The new American myth, leading to a reborn, if more modest, love of country, will find a way to tell us again that we are better off when "we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." It is not an easy myth in an age when national community seems dead or dying. But we must begin with Jefferson, who wrote (this in a letter to his wife dated March 28, 1787): "It is a part of the American character to consider nothing as desperate; . . . we are obliged to invent and execute; to find means within ourselves."