When Community Looks Like One Person

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It is shocking how disorienting and out of place you can feel standing in a space you once thought you knew so well when approaching it under different pretenses. As a Dallas native on my way to my first day of transfer orientation events at SMU, I, for some reason, found myself in a state of contemplative anxiety, making the same drive down the tollway I had been making for years from my hometown to Dallas. I found myself grappling with the unsettling fear that I would find my pre-destined community, neither on that day nor in the three and a half years I would spend at SMU. I would later learn that this tugging intuitive feeling was, in fact, more of a psychic prediction; I never did find the community that I longed so deeply for. However, while I did not find the community I wanted, expected, and felt entitled to, I found something far more valuable: the community I deeply needed, and, in the process, I learned to redefine that pesky little term that plagued my mind: "community." At SMU, I learned to sidestep my view of a community as large clubs, busy group chats, or packed events. I realized that a community often does not come in numbers but rather a sense of belonging, understanding, and identification that can come from just one person.

Having been born and raised in Texas, specifically in a suburb around a mere 30-minute commute from SMU and the heart of Dallas, I was deeply familiar with the area and the university. For my adolescent friends and me, exam week was marked by heading up to Dallas to lock ourselves in the coffee shops we deemed far superior to the ones near our high school and homes. Similarly, a weekend meant we would go to whatever concert, new restaurant, or event was being held in the city. Suffice it to say I spent nearly 19 years of my life absorbing, experiencing, and understanding Dallas, yet somehow still felt like a disoriented fish out of water

coming to SMU. I chose to come here largely because I thought I could avoid feeling the way I did when I got to SMU. The fact that I was transferring to SMU at the start of the spring semester of my first year certainly did not help this discombobulation. Not only did I not know anyone at SMU, but I was now a whole semester "behind" my classmates, who already had months to build a community around them. Greek life was never an option for me for many reasons, so while nearly half of my classmates were focused on refining or redefining their communities and identities during rush week, I was focused on building one in the first place.

To contextualize my panic, I need to emphasize that, like many other teens, I measured the strength of my community by its size. Sure, other factors came into play, like how often I saw other members, how deeply I felt connected to them, or how much I thought I could trust them. However, size was always my "trump card." Knowing what I felt was enough people at even a surface level (or lacking this) brought me a level of comfort (or lack thereof) that could not be achieved by much else in my adolescence. During my senior year, I finally felt I had reached this arbitrary measure of a sufficiently large community, only to have it ripped away by graduation. With this, you can imagine my shock and horror when I realized that despite thinking I would be "ahead of the curve" attending a university in what was essentially my hometown, I was, by many measures, falling behind.

My association with a community as a somewhat large group is not isolated, especially when you are younger. According to the American Psychological Association, "Human communities are often characterized by (a) commonality of interests, attitudes, and values; (b) a general sense of belonging to a unified, socially integrated group; (c) members' self-identification as community members; and (d) some system of communication, governance, education, and commerce,"(APA Dictionary of Psychology). Cambridge defines a community as

"the people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality," (Cambridge Dictionary). In its simplest iteration, the Oxford English Dictionary categorizes community as a body of people or things viewed collectively (Oxford University Press). While there are some specific aspects of these definitions I take issues with, my point of contention is the implicit suggestion across all of them that a community requires a sort of strength in numbers. While none of the definitions put a numerical threshold to cross, an overarching theme that emerges among them is that a community must, at the very least, be made up of multiple individuals (not including the person referring to their community) and more likely requires quite a sizeable number of members.

But how many people are enough to deem your community "strong" and "good"? Are all of the members of your community equally important, and do they even need to be? These are the types of questions I found myself asking when I was tied to this "strength in numbers" definition of community, and this was the mindset I took into my personal community-building efforts.

My first day on campus was the first time I truly began to question this notion of community. The looming sense of panic I felt driving up to campus from my home was so jarring that I spent the entire 30-minute car ride and 15 extra minutes parked in the car on the phone with my childhood best friend to try and bring me some peace. I rattled on about how I would know absolutely no one there and was scared of coming off awkward or off-putting. Thankfully, my friend brought me some comfort, but at the end of the day, she was not coming to SMU with me either for orientation or once I moved onto campus full-time. For the first 30 minutes, orientation was precisely what I feared it would be. I was singular and had not spoken to anyone. However, this changed when it was time to take our group picture in front of the Lyle

Building. After being moved to stand next to her, another transfer student, who I would come to find out was also a freshman, complimented my wallet. In return, I complimented her dress; today, over three years later, she is my best friend and the singular "community" I will be leaving with when I walk across the stage in May.

Before discussing how one individual restructured my view on community, it is worth clarifying that isolation and loneliness are not issues specific only to me, especially among peers in my age group. A recent *Campus Safety Magazine* article cited a 2024 study of over 1,000 college students in the United States that found that "nearly two-thirds (64.7%) of college students report feeling lonely, and more than half (51.7%) are concerned about their friends' mental health" (Rock, 2024). This is especially surprising in light of recent overarching efforts to destigmatize mental health and publicize its discussion. As of late, many teens and young adults, specifically in the U.S., have felt emboldened to open up to their friends and family about their mental health struggles and post about them on their social media platforms for the world to see. It is no surprise that the same study uncovered that "around 63% of college students said they believe having good mental health is important, and 54% said taking care of their mental health informs their decisions guiding their behavior and actions" (Rock, 2024). So, where is the disconnect? How is it that we know and care more about mental health than ever before, but issues like intense feelings of loneliness and isolation from loved ones and society at large have become more prevalent than ever simultaneously?

Many different factors can help explain this odd truth, but the reality is that any issue centered around mental health is hugely personal and individualistic. Still, valid generalizations can be drawn. According to the aforementioned study, "LGBTQ+ college students were more likely to report feeling lonely (70.3%) than non-LGBTQ+ college students (60.6%) [and] among

LGBTQ+ college students, 33.8% feel like they often are isolated from others, 26.9% often feel left out, and 22.6% feel like they often lack companionship" (Rock, 2024). Additionally, the study asserts that "Black and Latino college students are also more likely to agree that having good mental health and taking care of their mental health is important compared to other racial and ethnic groups" (Rock, 2024). Clearly, identifying factors, like race and sexual orientation, deeply affects and, in some cases, predisposes individuals to increased suffering. Interestingly, that same study found "a strong positive association between being concerned about friends' mental health and helping their friends take care of their mental health" (Rock, 2024). This reveals a problematic cycle where, even when you are not at odds with your own struggles, it is almost inevitable that someone close to you is struggling. As you worry and ponder the issues of those close to you, you slowly begin to absorb them. This brings to light one way in which having a smaller community around you can help protect your mental well-being. With fewer people in your community comes the knowledge that you will less often be racked with anxiety about what your fellow community members are experiencing, allowing you to keep yourself from intense external sourced mental anguish.

Regardless of the possible burden it may bring into your life, the idea of having a strong community around you fundamentally acknowledges that the positives of this strong community greatly outweigh the negatives. As many of us have heard time and time again when referring to complex tasks or large-scale projects, "it takes a village." The opposite is also true, however; to have a village around you, you also must be willing and able to be a villager for your community members when they need it most.

My three and a half years at SMU were not by any stretch of the imagination uncomplicated or easy. I faced a multitude of battles, trials, and tribulations every step of the

way and around every corner. Some of them were somewhat to be expected, while others were far more atypical. However, my aforementioned best friend from transfer orientation was consistent through all of it and created a sense of belonging so strong that it re-wrote my definition of what a community was. It is odd to think that a singular individual could do what is traditionally thought of as a job for at least a few people, but that was the case.

Beyond the obvious fact that we met at transfer orientation, an event held by SMU, the university, in some other ways, facilitated our friendship and community building. Throughout our time here, we took many courses spanning various topics from medieval history, meteorology, communications, advertising, and others. This was key to community building in a few ways. For one, we spent an extended amount of time around each other. Especially when living on campus, it was a given on any day that the two of us would be seeing each other at least once. Whether we were studying for an exam, working on a group project that we were inevitably paired up for, or simply going to class together, we knew we would spend some time together. I have found that face-to-face interaction is a key part of community building and comradery, so having so much of it was invaluable.

A community must be versatile to be effective and serve many functions, making it challenging to think of a community as just one person. Sometimes, a community serves as a moral or religious counseling function; other times, it is purely academic and a tool for revision or idea generation. What I discovered during my time at SMU is that when you find the right person, that one individual can, in fact, be all of these things for you. As I touched on, my best friend served as my academic community while at SMU. We ended up eventually declaring the same major and minor and took the same classes for them. However, our strong academic community bond transcended matching class schedules and syllabi. Instead, we were able to

work so well together in this specific capacity because of a matching set of beliefs, values, and priorities regarding our academic outlook. Her weak points were my strengths and vice-versa, so we could genuinely and effectively learn from each other. Moreover, we had the same understanding of the value of hard work and prioritizing grades over other aspects of college life, so there was never a disconnect. We never had to fear that one of us would plagiarize the other or blow off plans to meet at 8 am before an exam to review because we stayed out too late the night before. Of course, our time together transcended class and generally academic settings, making it so powerful.

As I mentioned, life at SMU was not a well-paved and easy path for either of us; most of the time, it was, in fact, the exact opposite. Without going too far in-depth, for semesters at a time, it felt like something was constantly being thrown at one of us or, worse and more often, both of us simultaneously. In these times, community was truly redefined for me as not needing to be made up of multiple individuals. During these many dark and complicated times, my friend was absolutely everything to me, and, as she constantly relayed to me, the feeling was mutual. Sometimes, it felt like one of us took on a parental role of the other, acting as an authority figure or nurturer. Other times, our conversations were religious, spiritual, and philosophical in nature. We were each other's supplementary doctors when a multitude of health problems were thrown our way, and one or both of us were profoundly ill. Oftentimes, being in each other’s community meant being protectors when one of us was in danger or had some crime committed against us (which surprisingly happened more than once). The point was that we were always everything we needed for whatever we needed.

The point of having a community is not solely to console and assist you when bad things happen. A community is meant to be uplifting and improve your life. Beyond all of the hardships

I outlined, however, I was able to find a profound sense of gratitude, love, and joy within my community at SMU. Through my academic triumphs, career wins, birthdays, and personal wins, no matter how big or small, I knew that I had someone who was cheering for me so hard and would celebrate these wins just as much, or oftentimes even more than I would. We reciprocally never had to fear there was an underlying sense of jealousy or any hidden malicious intent when good things happen. When you have seen your community members go through such a tumultuous situation, their experiences of joy are far more meaningful and impactful. Moreover, when you see them as an extension of you, just as their pain feels like your own, so do their wins, celebrations, and joys.

When you stop feeling like you need many people around you to have a community, you can be far more picky and discerning about who you allow to be around you. Finding that community of one allowed me to keep people who need not be anywhere near me far away. I already had enough of everything I needed and that they could offer me. The ability to wholly feel like you can control who is in your life and specifically your community is such an important privilege to have and can protect you from so many kinds of danger, physical and mental. This is a privilege and aspiration that Social media follower counts have eroded by making so many think that "good" and "strong" communities need to be large. Nevertheless, when you feel like you need to fold more people into your community because "that is what a community is," the wrong people, who will do you more harm than good, can come in.

Coincidentally enough, in my most recent semester, as my time at SMU has come to a close, I have developed, built, and found a more substantial spanning community more reminiscent of the one I imagined as a freshman three and a half years ago. All in all, however, I would not change a thing about my college experience. That experience, and specifically living

for so long with a community of “just” one, brought me to the present moment and version of myself that I wholeheartedly believe would not exist otherwise. Existing for as long as I did with that singular community allowed me to see that a community does not need to be expansive or homogenous to be strong and supportive. Still, normalizing smaller micro-communities made up of fewer people would likely have helped me and saved me much anguish and chasing after what should have been a nonexistent benchmark. I am not positive what this would look like or how this would even be accomplished, but it is a topic that merits attention and inquiry. As we continue to observe a rise in feelings of loneliness and isolation among teens and young adults, it is worth investigating where the more traditional notions of community are failing and where and by whom that slack can be picked up.

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