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CHOOSTING EACH OTHER

**TIMES HAVE CHANGED,
BUT THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND
TREASURES OF COMMUNITY HAVE NOT.**

By Molly Murfee // Images by Lydia Stern

“COMMUNITY IS A SIGN THAT LOVE IS POSSIBLE
IN A MATERIALISTIC WORLD WHERE PEOPLE SO
OFTEN EITHER IGNORE OR FIGHT EACH OTHER. IT
IS A SIGN THAT WE DON'T NEED A LOT OF MONEY
TO BE HAPPY; IN FACT, THE OPPOSITE.”

—JEAN VANIER, *COMMUNITY AND GROWTH*

Living in a mountain community can be a strange amalgamation of human movement.

At one point, I lived in a home surrounded by neighbors: an owner of a local eatery, après-ski bartender, artist, teacher, ski patroller. Now, locals can find their homes surrounded by dark windows, revolving doors, and those not subject to skipping Christmas dinner to serve other people theirs. The boom-bust economy that dominates these high-mountain havens also prompts swells in culture, body and breath. People come. People go. The chairlift operator here only for a season. The investor chasing the glimmer of a brighter

opportunity. The departing local who finally couldn't take the pressure. The pop-up realtor from somewhere else capitalizing on a hot spot.

Those who engage in the battle of staying become like a trove of rubies, glinting through the dirt and moss.

A small-town community is an intricate tangle of relationships, the hand-woven fibers dyed in a variety of colors, weaving themselves through and around each other, sometimes touching, sometimes knotting.

We serve as each other's bosses, co-workers, counselors, teachers, students, mentors, teammates – sometimes all at once. The hats we wear are plumed with flourish,



frayed baseball caps, touks pulled low over our eyebrows. Hoodies. They are jaunty, professional, outrageous, subdued. We've got to be flexible, able to nimbly interact with anyone regardless of the hat they're wearing at the time, even to switch gears mid-conversation. We know not to talk business at the polka dance, when the simple hat of friendship supersedes all others.

Neighbors in a community exchange cups of sugar, feed each other's dogs during vacations, water the garden. Neighbors see us in our bathrobes taking out the trash, offer us a drink when the day has been particularly hard. They trade high-altitude gardening tips over the fence, taking time to philosophize about the weather. We know when it's each other's birthday, if a family member is sick. Neighbors ask about that trip to the secret desert and really want to know what amazing things we saw.

We understand why someone was a little too drunk too early, and we don't hold it against him or her the next day. We let people have their bad days heavy as the base of a thundercloud, their jagged-hot angry days, their scream-at-the-top-of-your-lungs crazy days. We see each other's flaws, inconsistencies and insecurities, and they just wash over us like a breeze because we know we parade about with the same. In small communities we're constantly exposed, and instead of feeling naked, we settle into our exposure, flaunting ourselves like flags in a windstorm. People know our names,



jobs, passions, modes of recreation, hang-ups, loves and fears. It's okay. We all have them. In this Black Sheep Tribe community, we are family. Bonds beyond genealogy. We choose each other.

We say hi to each other at the post office, even if we pissed each other off the night before at the town council meeting, or hurt each other's feelings after a stressful week. We forgive. We let people make mistakes. We get mad at them – sometimes really mad – and eventually we have to let it go. Too much resentment clogs up the works.

We burn Grumps at a bonfire in the sacred center of the community, just to make sure nothing's lingering that might get sticky later.

Ideally, we don't communicate through the fear-ridden buffer of lawyers or hide in the parliamentary process of government. We grab an actual nut and face the discomfort of talking through an issue and coming to resolve, working to find creative consensus, even if it makes us squirm. We speak honestly, listen compassionately. Community. Communicate. Commune.

Experiences layer on top of one another



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like strata of geologic bands accumulated over the epochs. We bond over the first snowfall, and the biggest, and the least. The best wildflower season, the hottest chicken dance. We're initiated through all sorts of muddy, awful-weathered off-seasons that make us want to crawl out of our skin; navigating the North Face lift and its intimidating terrain; time and more time. We come together for Vinotok and Flauschink and the Red Lady Ball, knowing what they mean and why they're important. Our temple is the wild. We love the grit and dirt and rough-edged nature of the alleys, people and peaks. We expand, punch-drunk in the beauty, drinking deep of the stillness and spaciousness. The epicenter of our soul is this place. Our duty is to love, care and revel in it. Something in common. Community.

Being in community is going to our neighbor's benefit – like a personalized version of localized health insurance – bidding on silent auction items our friends made or gave that we don't really need. We're there when a community member commits suicide, gives up on fighting with diabetes, gets a divorce. We help them build their houses, haul wood, eat – for whatever reason

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they can't provide food for themselves. Community members listen and console and dance together. It's stuffing envelopes for HCCA, helping prepare the feast for Vinotok. It's hiking a peak for someone struggling with cancer. It's a donation of time and participation. This is the place of the potluck, the fall funeral, the wedding on the Woods Walk.

This brings us together – our concern for each other and this place. Our desire for the wellbeing of the whole.

We sink our fingers into the musky-loamed roots of history, proud to know the old-timer names, honoring our historians like rock stars. We know what aspects and times of day offer the best corn snow, and the lineage of businesses that have occupied a particular space. We know the secret hideouts of the heirloom thornless raspberries as well as the wooded fairy-ring circles of sweet chanterelles and sifted sunlight.

Being a community member is not, therefore, synonymous with being a consumer. It's not a relationship that can be bought or sold, a commodity to be acquired, an instantaneous designation. It is an honor to be earned.

This, perhaps, is where the difference begins. At one point we all made a choice. We chose here. We chose not making a six-figure paycheck, not having shopping convenience and bulk, not needing a code of dress or manner. We chose to not always have the latest fashion or fanciest house or newest car. Most of us didn't care about those things anyway, so the decision was easy.

What we did choose was rugged terrain and wild proximity. We chose adventure and freedom. And we all knew. It was a common bond, a common value, a common experience that tied us together, a secret card we knew we'd all played. The yin-yang demands of the universe declared we must make a sacrifice. We chose to sacrifice money with all of its entrapments. Common unity. We giggled at our good fortune.

That has changed.

In the world of the Internet and easy air travel, people no longer have to make that sacrifice. You can email from anywhere. Skype, overnight mail, fax and text. You don't have to forfeit a salary. The bond of choice that once tied the community together is fragmented. And with that comes a different value system, a different sense of expenditure – one that is connected to the perceived material necessities of a



781 County Road 4

Privately nestled on 36 ac and easily walkable from the prized Butte Ave. neighborhood, this warm and elegant 5 bd & 3 1/2 bath home offers tall great room with dry-stack stone fireplace, fabulous views to the Elk Mtn horizon and 250' of both sides of the Slate River. 5 Bed | 3.5 Bath | MLS # 731695 | \$4,295,000



133 Rainbow Drive | Almont

On the river! Spacious home with elevator, 3 wood-burning fireplaces, workshop, exercise room, large garage, all on over an acre. Includes 280' of Gunnison River frontage. 5 Bed | 6 Bath | 5,598 SqFt | \$1,389,300

1851 Sioux Rd. | Wilderness Streams

Hilltop cabin on prime 8-acre lot overlooking the lake with views to the Castles & Ohio Crk. Valley. Interior includes full-round log detailing, 2 fireplaces. Gated community. 4 Bed | 3.5 Bath | 4,585 SqFt | \$1,250,000



18 Buttercup Lane | Mt. C.B.

Promontory home on 1+ acre with expansive, protected views, 2 fireplaces, studio apt., decks on 3 levels, living and family room, great breakfast room. 5 Bed | 4.5 Bath | 3,928 SqFt | \$1,025,000

87 Coyote Circle | Skyland

Spacious duplex townhome on 1 acre, 3 decks, heated 2-car garage, great views, stone fireplace, hardwood, Viking granite kitchen, close to Town! 3 Bed | 2.5 Bath | 2,429 SqFt | \$995,000



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104 Horseshoe, Mt Crested Butte

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Coal Creek Home

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society where appearances matter, rather than a chosen simplicity with a richness of experience in a wild, wild home.

And so, the community becomes threatened by the lack of affordable housing; neighborhoods turn into investments and income rather than homes. It is threatened by straight lines, shiny surfaces and a phobia of dirt and weirdness. Money, the insidious haunt of greed, and too many people too disconnected from this earth. It is threatened by people who don't say hi, or introduce themselves, or find it interesting to chat up the slightly offbeat local next door. It is threatened by stringent attitudes and cross-cultural clashes forcing transplant cultures onto the local culture – trying to change it without taking time to listen, observe, absorb and take part. It is threatened by fear.

The slow ease and friendliness of the country community is threatened by the persona and habits of the big city – the hurried pace, the lack of knowing the neighbors, the need for amenities and pavement. The “I get what I want regardless.” The polish. The reserve. The “get out of my way; I'm on a bike ride, a ski run, a hike.” The perception that you can buy whatever you need, or buy off whatever is in your way.

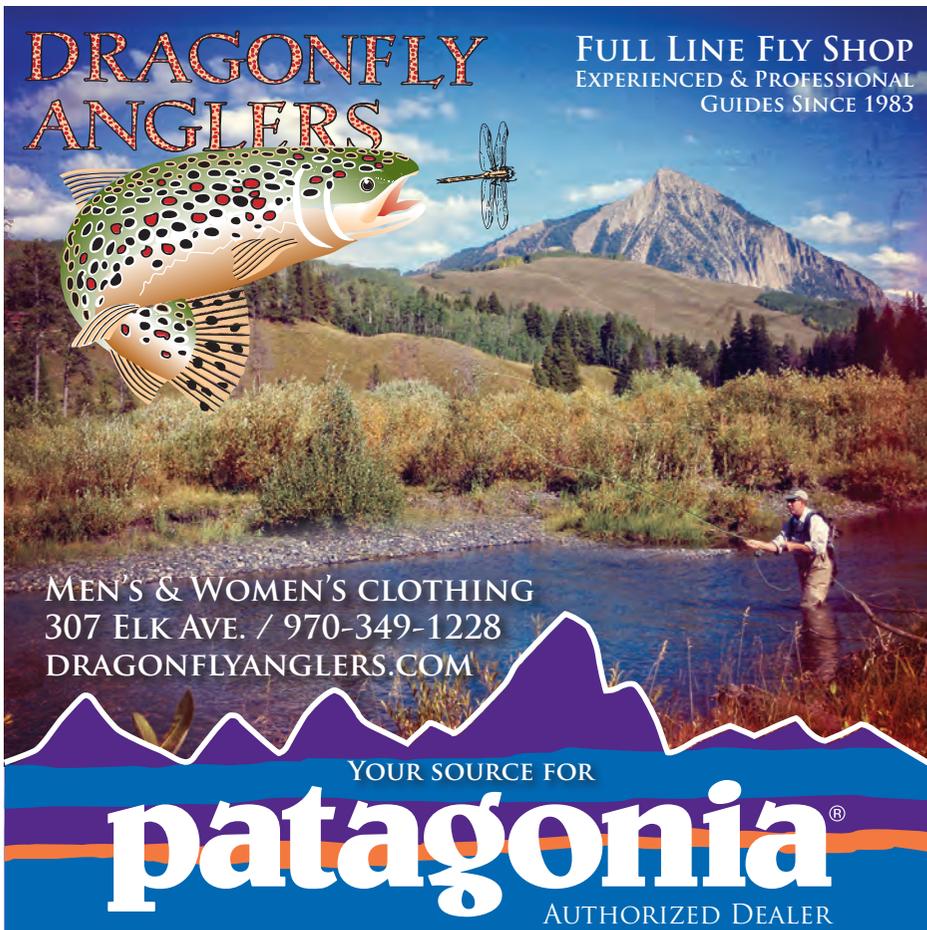
Our eyes used to twinkle at each other from across the street, the restaurant, the lift line, in the knowing. Now, we cling to each other like lifeboats.

To become a community member means accepting what is, relishing it, loving it. Indeed, people should come here to celebrate what it is, not to change it. Not to force shiny, newer, better, bigger on it. Not to tame it or its people or its culture.

Pull your eyeballs up from the cemented sidewalk, the glare of hand-held devices. Don't avoid interaction by scurrying back to the safety of your own walls, the entrapment of your cars. Sit on a bench. Look people in the eyes. Acknowledge their unique presence in the world. A popular poster on how to build community advises us to plant flowers, sit on our front stoops, open our shades. Be available, be open, be interested. Allow opportunity for chatting, as through these small interactions, relationships can grow. Commune. Unity.

Spend time. Spend some more. Be patient. Volunteer. Get dirty. Get uncomfortable. Listen. Forgive. Accept.

Become a part. **cb**



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