A Communitarian Response to Contemporary Problems

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A Communitarian Response to Contemporary Problems

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by

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A Communitarian Response to Contemporary Problems

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Democracy is an ongoing moral quest, not an end state, and we in America need to continue that long process in our society. . .

Robert Bellah

Ours is a nation in crisis. In spite of the fact that the end-of-the century economy is booming and many Americans find themselves enjoying their lifestyle and the bank balances that make it possible, there is a troubling reality in the balance of our country's moral account.

The institutions that shaped our nation no longer provide the anchors for its citizens. Families, churches, schools and governments are not the sources of leadership, guidance and proscriptions that they were a century ago. Little in our society is clearly black or white, right or wrong. Though many Americans are uncomfortable with ever-shifting values and declining standards of conduct, they are reluctant to voice their concern. We as a people uphold one principle of democracy, individual freedom, above all others. We do so to our detriment.

Democracy in the United States is not the "moral quest" that Robert Bellah advocates. It is considered an end product, a fixed form of government earned by our forefathers. The most cherished element of
our democratic society is the exercise of individual freedom. The rights of
the individual in the United States at the end of the twentieth century are
revered and protected. They are also expanding. An inherent problem in
this proliferation of rights is the lack of accompanying responsibilities. A
community whose highest priority is the unfettered, responsibility-free
individual is not, and cannot be, a community. As Robert Bellah says in
*Habits of the Heart*:

...this vision of freedom as freedom from
the demands of others provides no vocabulary
in which . . . Americans can easily address
common conceptions of the ends of a good life
or ways to coordinate cooperative action with others. (24)

It is precisely this lack of "vocabulary" that makes dialogue, and
therefore, solutions to our nation's problems difficult to achieve. Some
common ground is essential. One response to the ills that beset our
nation is the Communitarian approach. With a common sense, grassroots
effort, Communitarians seek to provide a vocabulary of response and
responsibility in the national conversation. In this often rancorous debate
over the troubling issues that confront our nation, Communitarians offer
both philosophic and practical solutions.

Although the dictionaries of the late twentieth century still define a
communitarian as "a member of a communistic community" (Oxford, 281)
it is the second definition "of or relating to a community" that
Communitarians seek to advance. It is a school of thought that attempts
to transcend the restrictions imposed by religion and politics, although
both religious and political groups may be involved in achieving Communitarian goals. Simply stated, Communitarians advocate a “from the community up” approach to problem-solving rather than a “from the government down” perspective. It is their assertion that the most basic groups of a society can accomplish the greatest good by identifying a problem and using community resources and individual initiative to address it.

Communitarians see themselves as political environmentalists, concerned about protecting the social and moral fabric of our society for future generations. Amitai Etzioni, a professor at George Washington University, is a leader of the movement who has popularized the concept of Communitarianism. In his *The Spirit of Community*, he defines both the movement and the problems that necessitate it:

The Communitarian assertions rest upon a single core thesis: Americans—who have long been concerned with the deterioration of private and public morality, the decline of the family, high crime rates, and the swelling of corruption in government—can now act without fear. We can act without fear that attempts to shore up our values, responsibilities, institutions, and communities will cause us to charge into a dark moral tunnel of moralism and authoritarianism that leads to a church-dominated or right-wing world. (2)

Although this “dark tunnel of moralism” is a legitimate fear (religiously affiliated groups have for centuries attempted to impose their agendas on the government and lives of Americans), Communitarians refuse to be
deterred by it. The “dark tunnel” does not embrace the idea of the greater good, rather it promises hope and salvation for a chosen few.

The Communitarian agenda, however, is one of the greater good. Communitarians urge citizens to begin Etzioni’s process of “shoring up our values” confident that this can be done without impinging on basic freedoms. While they concede that individual options might be curtailed or subordinated to achieve goals that benefit the majority, Communitarians are confident that no significant liberties will be lost. As liberal factions voice their protests over potential limitations, the dialogue between them and Communitarians in academic circles becomes both exciting and enlightening. In their anthology, *Communitarianism and Liberalism*, Avineri and de-Shalit sum up the conflict this way:

> . . . at the beginning of the 1980’s it became clear that, sooner or later, the most crucial and substantive challenge to the neo-Kantian theories (of liberalism) would emerge from the scholars who were called “communitarians.” And, indeed, the debate between individualists and communitarians has become one of the most important and fascinating issues of political philosophy. (1)

Etzioni, at the forefront of this debate, proposes a “new golden rule,” one which would balance the rights of the individual with the responsibilities essential to maintaining a “good community.” Simply stated, the rule is “Respect society’s moral order as you would have society respect and uphold your autonomy.” (RC 10)
What is a community and what constitutes a good one? This deceptively simple question is at the very heart of the Communitarian movement, a cause whose very name is based on the word "community." A fairly non-controversial definition might be "a community is people who share a specific location and common goals." Yet common goals remain an elusive commodity. If communities could easily achieve consensus regarding their goals, we would not be facing the moral dilemmas that plague us today. Etzioni, in his *The New Golden Rule*, offers a most provocative definition: "Community is a set of attributes, not a concrete place." (GR, 6)

In what he terms a "functional paradigm," Etzioni urges us to look at these attributes, at the needs of every society, and how citizens choose to respond to those needs. If psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy can be used as a model, primary needs of food, clothing and shelter must be met before secondary needs such as safety and love can be addressed. Maslow identifies the highest need as fulfillment of one's potential. This fulfillment Maslow reluctantly calls "self actualization," a term fraught with possibilities for misinterpretation, as he explains:

... this term has proven to have the unseen shortcomings of appearing a) to imply selfishness rather than altruism, b) to slur the aspect of duty and dedication to life tasks, c) to neglect the ties to other people and to society, and the dependence of individual fulfillment upon a 'good society.'

(Maslow, vi)
Maslow goes on to say that healthy individuals are products of a healthy society, as sick individuals are products of a sick culture (Maslow, 6). A society in which certain individuals attain the highest level of self-actualization while ignoring the primary needs of others is weakened at its core—is indeed a “sick culture.” Etzioni reminds us that there are “alternative responses” for every need, and that these responses determine the character of our communities.

Alexis de Tocqueville coined the phrase “habits of the heart,” (the inspiration for Bellah’s book of the same name) in the 1830’s. In his work, Democracy in America, de Tocqueville vividly describes the relationship of the individual and the community. His candid observations about democracy are colored by his European roots and the fact that nineteenth century Americans knew little of revolution. Indeed, he states: “. . .they have not had a democratic revolution. They arrived on the soil they occupy in nearly the condition in which we see them at the present day; and this is of considerable importance.” (DiA, 7) de Tocqueville expresses concern about a growing sense of individualism in which citizens forget their ancestors and allegiances. He cautions that “untrammeled individualism might undermine a commitment to a sense of community.” (Utne, 105)

While a larger and larger segment of our population achieves economic prosperity, there is less and less concern for promoting “the general welfare.” These familiar words from the Constitution describe a
greater good—the good of the community. Yet there is growing fear in our nation that a general good can only be achieved at the expense of individual freedoms, and this is a sacrifice few are willing to make.

Political analysis is seldom based on language, but considering recent trends toward the individualism that so struck de Tocqueville, an examination of pronouns seems in order. Never before has the word “I” so completely dominated the verbal landscape of our nation; it is the watchword of liberals: “I have a right to...” prefaces declarations from day care centers to boardrooms. Rarely are such statements followed by “I have a responsibility to...” This tendency was graphically illustrated in a study by Morris Janowitz of the University of Chicago in the early '90's. “Young Americans felt strongly about their right to a jury trial but {an overwhelming majority} did not want to serve on a jury. (Elsasser)

“We,” as a collective, community pronoun seems archaic, conservative and abandoned at the end of the twentieth century. “They” receive the blame for terrifying random acts of violence in our country, and an equally nebulous “they” in the form of government controls are expected to provide solutions.

Communitarians argue for the return of the plural pronoun, to say “We have a responsibility for ourselves, our neighbors, our community.” An examination of the subtle, centuries-long shift from “We” to “I” is essential to an understanding of the importance of Communitarian philosophy today.
The historic basis of this shift in pronouns is easily traced. Medieval life emphasized membership in various aspects of the community—the guild, the village, the Church. An individual was the sum of the groups to which he belonged. The Renaissance trumpeted the talents and accomplishments of the individual apart from associations. Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarrotti produced magnificent works as apprentices under the auspices of a master craftsman. Their achievements transcended the goals of the guild and provided inspiration for peasant and monarch alike.

The Protestant Reformation rejected the abject, sheep-like Catholic devotion to the Pope and encouraged a faith based on an individual relationship with God. Thomas McCollough states: “The revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century all contributed in fact and theory to the eclipse of person-in-community by individual-in-society.” (33) This eclipse, a paradigm shift of no small scale, begs an examination of the philosophic underpinning of self vs. society. Alexis de Tocqueville puts it this way:

Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king; democracy breaks that chain and severs every link of it. (DIA, 99)

As vital as every individual link is to the “democratic chain,” severed pieces cannot possess the strength of a united chain or community.
Aristotle maintained that man was a social, as well as political, animal—not self-sufficient outside of the polis. He believed that tribes, groups and governments formed to help the individual more easily acquire those things necessary for survival. Aristotle was clear, however, in his caution that government alone cannot make morally virtuous citizens. Virtue is created by the choices individuals make for themselves; it cannot be mandated by government decree. In this respect one could say that Aristotle espoused a Communitarian philosophy of individuals as members of groups to accomplish good works that government cannot, and should not, provide.

John Locke, in his impassioned arguments for unlimited acquisition of property, was decidedly atomistic: The "we" of government was only useful in protecting the rights of the individual—the all important "I" of liberalism:

The great and chief end, therefore, of men's uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property; to which in the state of nature there are many things wanting. (66)

Locke's definition of civil society, however, includes the consent of the individual to be governed, and stresses the necessity of both rewards and punishments. Locke espoused the "natural identity of interests," a self-interest that he hoped would be enlightened enough to "coincide with the interests of society as a whole." (McCullough, 39). This seems to beg the question: Is civil society by definition a collection of multiple "I's" or a
collective "We"? (Cohen) While liberals lean toward "I" statements, Communitarians answer resoundingly: "We."

To examine the "I" of self in isolation is, for practical purposes, impossible: "This view of the self requires...the complete abstracting of oneself from one's situation." (McLaren, 85). Gerald Dworkin echoes McLaren's premise:

...Communitarians have shown that individuals do not exist outside particular social contexts, and that it is erroneous to depict individuals as free agents. We are social animals, members in one another. (Dworkin, 62)

It is this belief in membership in one another that is crucial to translating Communitarian philosophy into action. While social contract theories explain how individuals can live together in civil society, McCollough explains in *The Moral Imagination and Public Life*, there is a "problematic notion of community":

The idea that individuals enter into a social contract because of rational self-interest ignores the fact that persons do not exist apart from society. By the time individuals come to political consciousness they have been shaped, along with their reason and their interests, by society. (71)

This "shaping" of individuals by society creates a inexorable link, a bond to those institutions and communities which molded us into the social creatures we undeniably are.

What efforts best express the Communitarian ideal of "shoring up" our values and responsibilities? The following examination of four community
organizations provides compelling answers to this question. While none of the organizations has received a formal endorsement from any Communitarian group, each marshals the talents and resources of individuals in a manner designed to meet a specific need of the community. Each is a grassroots effort to improve the lives of individuals and the communities in which they live. All are nationally organized with common general goals that employ local leadership and volunteers to achieve those goals.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Habitat for Humanity, Second Harvest Food Bank, and the Boys and Girls Club of America are models of cooperative community action. Each is the creation of an individual who proposed an effective response to a problem in our society. Government funding and involvement is minimal or nonexistent in these organizations. All of them have small, paid staffs but credit their success to the legions of individuals who volunteer talent, time and resources. All have weathered criticism for their efforts, but for decades each has improved the lives of citizens in communities across our nation. Indeed, each of them, by the very nature of its program, creates its own caring community within a community.
In 1980 Candy Lightner lost her daughter in an automobile accident caused by a driver who was drunk. To work through her grief, she founded a local organization she called MADD—Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Her stated goal was to introduce legislation to prosecute and incarcerate drunk drivers. In less than twenty years MADD has become an international effort with 600 local chapters representing every U.S. state, as well as Canada and Puerto Rico. Three million people are members of an astonishingly effective organization. This grassroots effort, which began in a California living room, embodies the essence of Communitarianism. MADD is powerful evidence that the private sector can have an impact on public policy and change the lives of Americans.

The mission of MADD is to stop the crime of drunk driving. Three key areas comprise its focus: legislation, victim support and education. MADD is funded through contributions, grants and depends on volunteer staffing. How can you measure the success of such an effort? The numbers speak volumes: In 1980, the year that Cari Lightner was killed, she was one of over 32,000 such victims in our country. While other
factors may well have contributed to the decrease, since the creation of MADD that year, traffic deaths related to alcohol have dropped by nearly 40% and saved approximately 80,000 lives. The powerful impact of such a decrease is mitigated by the fact that drunk driving remains the most frequently committed violent crime in America. Thus, while MADD’s effectiveness is documented, its mission is far from achieved.

Why has MADD been so successful in its first nineteen years? The organization became the “media darling” of the 1980’s as angry victims demanded the same judicial treatment and “perks” as the perpetrators of crime. The legislative agenda set by Candy Lightner soon revealed the inequities (or total lack) of protection for victims. MADD defines a “victim” as “an individual injured by a drunk driver, or the immediate family of a person killed or injured by a drunk driver.” (Morris) Attention to the voice of the victims and survivors—a relatively new idea in the United States—quickly found favor. Drunk driving achieved epidemic status when MADD provided statistics that had previously been expunged by attorneys defending those accused of negligent driving or driving under the influence. MADD efforts capitalized on national outrage generated by the actions of repeat offenders.

Victim support takes many forms, yet each is uniquely Communitarian in its approach. MADD members and employees assist in litigation (often a painfully slow, years-long ordeal) and attend court hearings and trials. To ensure the rights of the defendants, MADD members may not wear or
use anything bearing the organization's logo while appearing in court.

Any indication of MADD involvement is considered prejudicial to the accused. On the same note, obituaries rarely, if ever, ask for contributions to MADD because the implication that the victim died at the hands of a drunk driver may prejudice legal actions. One effort to support victims is VINE, Victim Impact Notification Everyday. VINE is a notification network that alerts victims (via a toll-free number) when there is a change in an offender's custody status or court schedule. To ensure that such information only reaches legitimate victims, a personal identification number is assigned to each case. (MADDvocate)

Another victim assistance program is MADD CATS (Community Action Team). The CATS program was developed to assist in areas where there are not enough members or resources to achieve full MADD chapter status. These smaller, but effective groups are active in many communities. Some CATS are "prosecutor-based" and assist in actual courtroom situations. One important function of a prosecutor's assistant is to ensure that no disposition of a case occurs without input from the victim. CATS accompany victims to court and work with municipal judges.

One important step made by MADD in terms of litigation is the voice of the victim in sentencing. Early decisions found judges handing down sentences that inadvertently increased the grief of the victims: mandated grave tending by the drunk driver, for example, can be a painful intrusion
into a family’s grief. Victim input prior to sentencing protects privacy and offers survivors a chance to channel anger constructively.

Litigation frustration led MADD to become a powerful voice for legislative changes that would strengthen their efforts in court. Lobbying and successfully raising the national legal drinking age to 21 in 1984 was only the beginning of an avalanche of MADD-driven laws. MADD has been involved in the passage of over 2400 pieces of legislation. One current effort is the lowering of the blood alcohol count to establish legal drunkenness. Florida and fifteen other states have lowered their BAC from .1 to .08. Maine has the lowest legal limit in the nation at .05. All other states are .1% of blood alcohol. A survey conducted by the Boston University of Public Health assessed the effectiveness of the new law. The results are revealing:

In the six years after Maine reduced the illegal BAC limit from .10 to .05 for convicted offenders, the proportion of fatal car crashes involving such drivers dropped by 25 per cent. Meanwhile, the rest of New England experienced a whopping 46 per cent increase in the proportion of fatal crashes involving this type of offender. (Driven, Fall 98, 5)

Although it has been illegal since 1986 for minors (under the age of twenty-one) to drink, it was not against the law to drink and drive unless the specific blood alcohol levels set by each state were reached. MADD pushed for a national standard. In 1995, Congress passed legislation requiring all states to adopt “zero tolerance” laws for minors by 1999. Zero tolerance laws make it illegal for individuals under the age of twenty-
one to drive with any measurable amount of blood alcohol (maximum of .02). South Carolina became the fiftieth and final state to adopt zero tolerance for minors in the spring of 1998: a MADD success story.

How is lobbying for such legislation a Communitarian effort? Amitai Etzioni warns that "law in a good society is first and foremost the continuation of morality by other means." (Rule, 143) There must be a commitment to the values reflected in the law to achieve lasting results. Etzioni applauds the influence of MADD in its effort "to define driving while under the influence of alcohol as morally unacceptable" (Rule, 147) and in working to establish sobriety (safety) checkpoints in all fifty states. He warns, however, that laws must express a community's values and maintain order for those who feel no commitment to those values:

In short, the law mops up after the moral changes have carried out the main sweep; and it does play a key role in shoring up the moral order or in avoiding slippage by dealing with those who do not heed the moral voice. (Rule, 148)

A predictable stumbling block in the legislative effort of MADD is the large number of politicians who receive campaign funds from the liquor industry. Both of Florida's senators (one Democrat, one Republican) are the recipients of contributions from Seagrams and both frequently vote against MADD's political agenda.

A 1998 law passed in New York City calls for the impoundment and sale of the car of anyone convicted of drunk driving. A predictable hue
and cry ensued and appeals were filed, yet the passage of the law sends a powerful message to potential offenders.

Although the Constitution of our country has been amended only twenty-seven times, MADD's legal arm has proposed a controversial twenty-eighth amendment—the Victims' Bill of Rights. (see appendix) "Maddvocates" (as lobbyists are called) argue that although four amendments added protection for those accused of crimes, none provides recourse for victims. This is due in part to the fact that the wronged party in a criminal activity is "the state." The individual wronged has no status, and victims have no specially guaranteed Constitutional rights.

Ironically, it is the crucial Fifth Amendment that inspires the Victim's Bill of Rights. A tenet of the Fifth Amendment is the infamous "double jeopardy" clause that prohibits prosecution or punishment for the same crime: "...nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb."

While this seems as reasonable today as it did to our founders, MADD begs that this scenario be considered: A person who pleads guilty to a charge of drunk driving cannot be charged with causing serious injury because that charge involves the same conduct. Once an individual is convicted and sentenced for drunk driving, additional charges may not be filed, even if a death results from injuries suffered during the incident. While respecting the essence and importance of the Fifth Amendment, MADD seeks to prevent light sentences for those who maim or kill while
driving drunk. Such a gaping loophole in our judicial system spurs on the MADD effort for a Victims' Bill of Rights amendment. Regretfully, the amendment has been relegated (in 1999) to a judiciary subcommittee and may not reach the full Congress for a vote this year.

For those who argue that only a small percentage of Americans are the victims of drunk driving, current MADD President Katherine Prescott begs to differ: “We all pay higher insurance premiums, and we all drive a little fearfully because we know drunk drivers are still on the roads.” (MADDvocate, 3) Newspaper headlines across the nation lend credence to her statement. Communitarians would applaud her point as it illustrates the connected nature of individuals in our society. Autonomy cannot be honored if it violates and threatens the well-being of others.

MADD provides educational services to any community group which requests them. Churches, schools, scout troops, even professional sports teams have requested and received literature, speakers or testimonials. Corporate sponsorship of educational campaigns provide funds for these efforts. Insurance companies (who themselves have a vested interest in reducing the claims made by victims of drunk driving) funnel millions into MADD's educational programs. Grants from such agencies as the United Way, the Magruder and the Edyth Bush Foundations also fund specific educational efforts such as school appearances before proms, graduations, spring breaks and other high-risk occasions.
Only the national president of MADD is required to be the mother of a child killed by a drunk driver. Survivors are often too distraught to channel their grief into political action. Therefore, local chapters nationwide are staffed by volunteers and paid employees. The Orlando branch was the nation's second to open. In 1981, Mary Wiley's daughter Alice died as the result of a drunk driver. Mrs. Wiley contacted Candi Lightner and started a Florida chapter. Since her retirement in 1992, this local organization is wholly staffed by paid employees who run a highly effective crusade from a tiny downtown office.

MADD realizes the power of semantics. The organization successfully lobbied the NHTSA, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, to change the word "accidents" to "crashes" because drunk driving is not an accident—"it is the most frequently committed violent crime in the United States." Ironically, the liberal challenge to MADD secured its own semantic victory this year. "Sobriety checkpoints" set up by law-enforcement officers to apprehend drunken drivers are now known as "Safety checkpoints."

Much of MADD's success has been duplicated by a spin-off organization that is, surprisingly, not affiliated in any way with the original effort. SADD, Students Against Drunk Driving, has become a popular service organization in public and private high schools across the country.

One important difference in the two organizations is the difference in the communities they represent. Drinking is legal for those over twenty-
one years of age in the United States; drinking and driving is not. MADD programs such as designated driver and Safe Ride programs ensure that those who drink legally (if irresponsibly) arrive home safely and do not endanger the lives of others. SADD does not sanction such programs because to do so would enable or possibly encourage illegal behavior. SADD’s message is one of zero tolerance for alcohol and drug usage.

The death of two high school athletes in separate drunk driving crashes in 1981 provided the catalyst for the first SADD chapter. A grieving hockey coach in Massachusetts organized a group of his students after the deaths of two of his players. An investigation proved both the involvement of alcohol and the disturbing fact that neither boy was wearing a seat belt. The SADD organization’s philosophy is a simple one:

If the problem of death from impaired driving and substance abuse lies with teenagers. . .
the solution lies with teenagers.

(SADD brochure)

In fewer than twenty years, more than seven million students in over 25,000 chapters are involved in some sort of SADD activity. Tellingly, SADD allowed member groups in 1998 to change the meaning of the acronym to “Students Against Destructive Decisions”—a change that allows SADD to address a host of teenage problems. The impetus for this change came from two sources. Many urban schools have students who use mass transit and other modes of public transportation rather than
drive private automobiles. These students wanted to form community service SADD groups yet felt the name limited their efforts. Other groups felt the need to include drug abuse and drinking while *not* driving as destructive decisions that needed to be addressed. A third interpretation of the name is Student Athletes Detest Drugs. All chapters under the SADD umbrella, regardless of the name, embrace the challenge of providing a leadership role within “the caring triangle of school, family and community.” (SADD, 6) Like MADD, the education and awareness programs of SADD promote safety and encourage healthy lifestyles.

MADD has redefined “driving” to include the operation of any moving vehicle. Recent efforts target BUI (boating under the influence of alcohol), as well as snowmobiling (Minnesota has passed legislation). National tragedies such as the 1989 Exxon Valdez collision underscore the fact that no one who operates a vehicle should do under the influence of any substance that impairs judgment.

MADD and SADD embody the principles of Communitarian philosophy in several concrete ways. Working with, but not funded by, government agencies both effect positive changes on the actions of individuals. The education efforts have had remarkable success—the acronyms are household words. Legislation and enforcement of new laws have heightened awareness of MADD’s ongoing effort to prosecute violators. Victim support provides comfort and a positive venue for memorializing those who have died at the hands of a drunk driver. The emotional stories
of these survivors are themselves powerful deterrents to those who habitually drink and drive.

In many ways the efforts of MADD illustrate the classic controversy between individualists and Communitarians. Safety checkpoints, lower blood alcohol counts, and forfeiture or impoundment of vehicles are all infringements on individual freedom. As established earlier, Etzioni applauds the concept of safety (or sobriety) checkpoints, but points out that organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union continue to oppose them. In *The Spirit of Community* he quotes the Michigan ACLU, citing their rhetoric as a prime example of why many states still do not have checkpoints:

> When the U.S. Supreme Court abdicates its historic role and defers completely to the judgment of the police, allowing police to stop, detain and interrogate people who are suspected of no wrongdoing whatsoever, we have gone a long way down the road toward a police state. (*Spirit*, 172)

A police state is not a goal of Communitarians. Removing drunk drivers from our roadways is a common sense deterrent to the inordinately high numbers of deaths caused by their irresponsible behavior. Government efforts to reduce vehicular fatalities lack the emotional “hit home” message conveyed by the families of victims. Listening to “mom,” in the form of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, is demonstrably more effective.
Building a Habitat house transforms not only one family, 
it transforms a whole community. 
Rosalynn Carter

Every Saturday morning, all over America, a hammering is heard. A 
home is being built. "Hammer it home!" proclaims the shirt of a teenager 
taking nails from a retired college professor. The future homeowner 
staples sheet rock to the foundation walls. Nearby a scout troop 
prepares lunch for the construction crew. Dozens of volunteers follow the 
directions shouted by an onsite construction supervisor. 

Few service projects for a community involve such a wide range of its 
citizens, and fewer still involve the recipient of the effort. Habitat for 
Humanity is a uniquely Communitarian, grassroots effort and an 
enormously successful agency for change. While Congress seeks reform 
of welfare laws by requiring recipients "to either work or perform 
community service" (Winkler, 108), Habitat solves the dilemma by 
requiring both. Etzioni, impressed by the Democratic agenda of the first-
term Clinton White House cautioned, "we should not expect that one man, 
dismounting from a white horse in front of Pennsylvania Avenue, will 
rescue us." Habitat for Humanity waits for no government help.
The agenda of Communitarian practitioners is "to shore up the social, moral, and political foundations of society" (Spirit, 2). If food, clothing and shelter are the three basic needs of human beings, then surely those primary needs must be met before the more ambitious philosophical agenda can be undertaken. A foundation, both literal and metaphorical, has been laid by the efforts of the twenty-three year old Habitat for Humanity. Since its humble inception in rural Georgia in 1976, Habitat credits itself with the construction of more than 60,000 homes worldwide. The organization's goal is to build its 100,000th house in September of the year 2000.

In 1968 Millard Fuller, a successful Alabama businessman, had an epiphany. After a retreat on a Christian communal farm, Koinonia, southwest of Americus, Georgia, to rebuild their failing marriage, the Fullers decided to forsake their worldly possessions and devote their lives to Christ. "Koinonia" is the Greek word for fellowship, and its residents toiled in endeavors to benefit the lives of destitute farmers in rural Georgia. Under the guidance of Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia, the Fullers worked to help others in concrete ways. Jordan's plan was a simple one—to build decent housing for the rural poor near his commune.

Unfortunately, Jordan died in 1969 and never saw more than the initial effort. This group's movement to build affordable homes, called Partnership Housing, built twenty-seven homes for poor tenant farmers in four years. It was the united effort of one group of individuals to express
their faith in a positive way. The philosophy of the project was to build decent housing using capital funds, not charity, and "co-workers" rather than caseworkers. Fuller calls this "biblical economics: Seeking no profit and charging no interest" (No More Shacks, 25). The Fuller family, buoyed by the success of this initial venture, took their four children and headed for a church mission trip to Zaire. The natives were understandably suspicious of Americans. Previous missionaries built houses for themselves and impressive structures for the worship of God, but no one had ever attempted to provide permanent shelter for the African people.

Eighty new houses later, in 1976, the Fuller family returned to the United States, and Habitat for Humanity was born. The organization's efforts center on three simple guidelines:

1. There must be "a core group of dedicated Christian leaders
2. Families selected must be involved in the actual building process
3. There must be love in the mortar joints."

(Shacks, 193)

*Love in the Mortar Joints* is the title of a 1980 narrative written by Millard Fuller. In it he explains Habitat's unique approach to government funding:

...although we accept, and even solicit, grants of government land and the installation of streets and water systems, we do not seek government money to finance Habitat's houses. Rather, they must be a tangible witness to the basic Biblical responsibility which every Christian has to share with a brother or sister in need.

(140)
While many interfaith groups erect Habitat homes, there is a Christian leader at every site. Families selected to receive homes commit to a total of five hundred family and friend work hours toward the construction of a home, and one hundred of those hours must be served prior to working on their own home. Contrary to common misconception, neither participants nor home recipients must be Christian. In the words of Fuller:

Habitat for Humanity does not build houses to convert the new homeowners. Many Habitat homeowners are already strong Christians long before their houses are built. Others are not Christians and do not become Christians because they get a Habitat house. (*Theology*, 29)

Habitat for Humanity is a Christian venture because it was founded by an intensely religious individual. It is a Communitarian effort because it uses the talents and resources of a community willing to address the tremendous need for housing in our country. This begs the question, "Must one be religious to be Communitarian?" (*GR*, 252) Etzioni counters this with an equally interesting query, "Must a person be religious to be virtuous?" (253) and a thought-provoking response:

... being religious does not guarantee virtue. ... as I see it, one can come to a communitarian position from religious and from secular sources. ... Most important, the main fault line does not separate those whose commitment to core values is a matter of religious considerations from those whose reasons are secular; instead, it separates those who are truly committed to a core of shared values from those who have lost theirs, have not affirmed any new ones, or deny the very existence of virtues. ... (*Golden*, 255)
In other words, it is a common core of values, not religious conviction that is essential to Communitarianism. Habitat for Humanity happens to possess both.

The interest and support of former President Jimmy Carter (a dedicated Christian who is often erroneously credited with starting the Habitat effort) and his wife Rosalynn generated favorable publicity and furthered the mission and the message of the fledgling organization. Mr. Carter explains his involvement this way:

The federal government, the state and local governments, have just about all they can handle. Sometimes they don’t do enough; sometimes the taxpayers think they do too much. Habitat encourages the federal government to have good housing programs. And private enterprise can build houses and sell them for profit. But Habitat is kind of the ‘frosting on the cake.’ It’s the additional contribution that is having a rapidly growing impact on poor people without homes. (Shacks, 15)

President Carter’s frosting analogy lends itself to a vision of Habitat as a “filling,” bridging the gap between inadequate government programs and a booming for-profit private housing industry product that many Americans cannot afford.

Most schools and churches provide member support for some type of community service. Tens of thousands of students and church members have contributed financial, material and volunteer help to build Habitat homes. Local chapters eagerly accept donations of time and money from groups or individuals. Often isolated volunteer efforts lead to an organization’s commitment to build a “home of its own.” Many citizens
simply join the crew of workers at a site regardless of the institution which
has committed to build the home, and unaffiliated individuals are always
welcome.

Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, joined the ranks of Habitat
builders in 1993 and construction of its fifth house was completed in 1999.
Initially homes built in the vicinity of Rollins (four in 1992-93) fell under the
broader auspices of the Orlando chapter of Habitat. To make it more truly
a community effort, several local municipalities established branches in
order to address housing needs in their own neighborhoods. These
branches allow greater accessibility to the housing sites for volunteers,
and contribute to the truly “neighborhood nature” of the work and finished
project. The group of volunteers who meet to build a home create a
community of their own during the construction period.

“We do lots of projects that involve raising money or collecting clothing
or food, but we don’t see the results of those drives. With Habitat, we can
drive by and say ‘There’s the house we built!’ said one college volunteer.
She voiced the satisfaction of others who have participated in the Habitat
program. Giving poverty a face and a name and putting a roof over a real
family’s head provides a tangible, lasting reward for both volunteer and
recipient. The philosophy of Millard Fuller and Habitat is that the recipient
is a volunteer.

Although the selection of a family to participate in and receive a Habitat
home is “fair, open, and disinterested—it remains the toughest part of the
process," says Thad Seymour, executive director of the Winter Park-Maitland Habitat affiliate, a spin-off of the original Orlando chapter. He speaks affectionately of each home and its occupants, and he enthusiastically outlines the plans for the next home, pointing it out on a map liberally dotted with existing and projected homesites. (see appendix)

Hal George, onsite construction supervisor for Habitat of Winter Park and Maitland, has built twenty-five homes in the Orlando area. A builder of luxury homes and ambitious remodeling projects, Mr. George is one of twenty-five directors of the board of the affiliate and its vice chairman. He is also one of the reasons it is such a unique chapter. His tireless efforts ensure that there is a consistent, supervised construction of several houses per year. Another crucial member of this operation is Jeff Briggs, City Planner for the city of Winter Park. Mr. Briggs and Mr. George, along with Thad Seymour and his wife Polly were the catalysts for the Winter Park-Maitland affiliate to become independent of the Greater Orlando organization in 1993. (National recognition came in 1994.) Mr. Briggs and the city of Winter Park offer Habitat city lots that contain condemned homes or those foreclosed on by the city.

With no paid staff, no permanent location and no overhead, the Winter-Park affiliate carries a positive bank balance. This seed money makes it possible to build "affiliate homes"—those whose cost is split between a sponsoring organization and Habitat of Winter Park and Maitland. On a recent visit, Millard Fuller declared that he had never seen
such a small, yet effective affiliate, one which is able to build three to five houses per year. It is an unusual affiliate—one of only a few being given land by a municipality, and one of only a very few with absolutely no overhead.

A visit to a monthly meeting reveals much about the success of this affiliate. A dozen board members of various ages and occupations—a physician, several attorneys, a home-maker, an English teacher—convene at the Winter Park Chamber of Commerce on the third Monday of every month. The meeting opens with a prayer (see appendix) and proceeds efficiently through committee reports. Two nearly completed homes (one of them the affiliate’s twenty-fifth) need “dedication”—a formal blessing. In conjunction with the dedication, an annual picnic to recognize volunteers, contributors and contractors is scheduled. The picnic will be paid for with grant money from Orange County. It is Habitat’s policy to accept public funding solely for non-construction items. Several area churches renew their commitment to build another house. Rollins College renews its biannual commitment to build a house. A “selection Saturday” is scheduled to accept applications for a home—one hundred applicants are anticipated. A private high school in Winter Park has sent representatives to discuss the possibility of building a home, consolidating its student community service efforts “under one roof.” The quoted cost of a home to be built during the 1999-2000 school year is $31,000. Hal George suggests that this be an “affiliate house”—one
whose cost is split between the school and the affiliate. After a brief discussion the motion is made and seconded. In under an hour the meeting is adjourned: Two houses near completion and dedication, three houses scheduled for building in the next year. Productivity with no bureaucracy.

Although the national foreclosure rate on Habitat homes is incredibly low, under 1%, The Winter Park affiliate boasts no mortgage foreclosures. Hal George beams as he reports this fact and explains how several procedures ensure this success rate. Families are chosen carefully. Their ability to make nominal payments is one criterion. The affiliate is guaranteed the right of first refusal on the mortgages. This right provides Habitat with necessary financial protection as the appraised value of the homes is much higher than what homeowners actually pay. Mortgages are based on roughly two-thirds of the appraised value of the home. Five hundred hours of labor constitute the down payment on a home, and the affiliate-held mortgages are twenty-year-no-interest loans. Typical principal payments are between one hundred and fifty and two hundred dollars per month, plus insurance. Should a Habitat home recipient be foreclosed upon anywhere in the nation (a rare occurrence), the home is cleaned, repaired and sold to another qualified candidate.

Some Habitat chapters, including the Winter Park-Maitland affiliate, offer home rehabilitation help, especially to those who own older Habitat homes. Most of America’s poor do not own their own homes, and it is
difficult to offer fix-up services to renters when the repairs would benefit absentee landlords. A Habitat home in a poor neighborhood is a great catalyst for home improvement. Rehabilitation of an older home in a Habitat neighborhood is an excellent way to use surplus volunteers, supplies and funds. Building Saturdays often generate more volunteers than can be safely supervised on a new home construction site. These extra volunteers perform such services as the clean up of yards, exterior cleaning and painting, and minor plumbing and electrical repairs.

The cost of each Habitat house varies by location. Rarely does a group ever need to do more than pledge the total funds necessary—the money and materials appear, as Millard Fuller promises, providentially. Hal George, who has supervised hundreds of student volunteers puts it more pragmatically:

Parents show up on Saturday morning and gape—here are children who have never lifted a tool in their own garages hanging drywall and nailing shingles—and doing a credible job of it. They whip out their checkbooks and ask, “How much do you need?” (Interview, April 12, 1999)

Other providers of funds and materials include lumber yards and building supply companies, many of whom offer their products at cost or at dramatically reduced rates. In the Winter Park operation, local suppliers prepare “everything you need to build one house” packages and deliver them to the construction site.
The Larsen Manufacturing Company became involved in the Twin Cities Habitat of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, by donating combination screen/storm doors. Dale Larsen, company president was so enthused about the program that doors are now delivered to local building sites all over the country—free of charge.

Though constructed for a fraction of the cost of a for-profit home, using volunteer labor and donated materials, Habitat houses are solidly built. In the wake of August, 1992’s Hurricane Andrew, all twenty seven Habitat homes in otherwise devastated neighborhoods remained standing.

Observers often label Millard Fuller “a crazy Christian.” To completely eliminate poverty housing and homelessness in the world is indeed a lofty goal, especially one house at a time. Critics also argue that housing is only one need in a much larger picture—what about the underlying problems of homelessness: unemployment, underemployment, lack of educational opportunities? Isn’t homelessness (or substandard housing), like hunger, merely a symptom of the crippling poverty that grips so many in our nation? Millard Fuller’s answer is that housing is the heart of the problem, a primary need for shelter which must be met first. Improved living conditions create better health—physical and mental. There is, he says, “the failure of many to recognize the connection between adequate shelter and overall development.” (Shacks, 43) For Fuller, whose motto is “All of God’s people should have at least a simple, decent place to live,” the house must come first.
The hammering continues. The membership rolls and coffers of Habitat for Humanity continue to swell—hundreds of thousands of volunteers and millions of dollars raised. One house at a time, Millard Fuller's dream becomes reality, and "the spirit of the community" builds homes and hope for those in need.
A Communitarian Response to Contemporary Problems

Chapter Four: Feeding the Hungry

Perhaps of all the woes that threaten and plague the human condition, hunger alone can be curtailed, attenuated, appeased and ultimately vanquished—not by destiny nor by the heavens, but by human beings. — Elie Wiesel

Few community efforts in America are as effective as those that feed the hungry. Perhaps it is the fact that while most citizens of our nation have never experienced homelessness or abject poverty, everyone, however briefly, has felt the pangs of hunger. Food pantries and soup kitchens across the country attempt to provide “food security,” the most current term for providing food to those who cannot afford to purchase it. An incredible number of private agencies in our country wage a daily battle to feed an ever-growing number of hungry Americans: Twenty-six million people received food from one national network alone, Second Harvest Food Bank, the single largest charitable source of food in the United States. By definition, a food bank “is a charitable organization that solicits, receives, inventories, stores and distributes donated food and grocery products to human service agencies.” (Faces & Facts, 1) Each aspect of food banking—soliciting, receiving, inventorying, storing and distributing provides a challenge and requires an army of volunteers to execute.
Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida began in 1983. Originally a church-based project of the Reformed Church of Latter Day Saints, the Community Food Bank (as it was known in the early eighties) was incorporated in 1981. It later affiliated itself with the National Food Bank Network and in 1987 became known as Second Harvest.

Second Harvest provides food to agencies in eleven central Florida counties through eight specific programs:

1. General Food Distribution
2. Second Helpings (prepared food rescue program)
3. Kids Café
4. Disaster Relief
5. Community Food Drives
6. Produce to the People
7. USDA Commodities (currently suspended)
8. Food Purchase Program

While Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida shares both programs and problems with a network of 184 member food banks, it possesses some unique traits. As a prime tourist destination, Orlando is home to hotel, convention, and amusement facilities, all of which serve food. Gleaning the leftovers is an around-the-clock job. To reap the "Disney harvest" alone, a truck and driver (provided by Disney, administered by Second Harvest) makes rounds all night, every night gathering perishable food and delivering it to onsite food facilities—day care centers, senior citizens’ homes and homeless shelters. This effort is known as the Second Helpings program. In addition to the Disney truck, two refrigerated vehicles operate for sixty hours each week to pick up and
deliver donations—food that would otherwise be wasted. Over a million pounds of food is “rescued” from restaurants, convenience stores, resorts and theme parks each year.

In 1997 Second Harvest of Central Florida was named national “Food Bank of the Year” for overall excellence in “food recovery and distribution.” (Annual report). A visit to the bustling, efficient warehouse reveals how this award was earned. Volunteers sort donations, trucks are unloaded and reloaded, computerized inventories are printed daily so that member agencies may “shop” for what they need. Teams of workers from schools, churches, and scout troops unload pallets of interesting and ever-changing donated items. Often a store will offer non-food items such as personal grooming products, food supplements or pet supplies. These are sorted, inventoried and offered to food pantries for distribution to their clients. All items are checked for freshness dates and seals—any products of questionable safety are discarded. “I expected to sort cans of soup and vegetables,” confessed a young volunteer, “but instead I sorted hair dye and checked packages of beef jerky for rips and bugs.”

Another unique feature of Second Harvest of Central Florida is the Kids Café program which provides an evening meal at four different sites in Orlando. This is a safety net project to feed children who participate in school breakfast and lunch assistance programs. Kids Cafes serve more than 30,000 meals per year and are located in housing projects, Boys and Girls Clubs and the Coalition for the Homeless. Food from both the
Second Helpings program and the Food Bank's general inventory is used to feed thousands of children.

Community Food Drives, an important source of inventory for food banks across the country, are perhaps the most recognized aspect of the food security mission. The Letter Carriers Drive, "Scouting for Food," and efforts by local television and radio stations help stock warehouse shelves at crucial holiday periods. Smaller food drives by businesses, schools, clubs and churches help in an effort that yields over a half million pound of shelf-stable food each year.

Produce for the People coordinates the donations of local produce processors and distributors to ensure that fresh fruits and vegetables are constantly available to member agencies. These agencies purchase food at fourteen cents per pound with no regard for the item—a box of cereal or a can of corn or a pound of grapes.

In a classic example of communitarian effectiveness in the face of governmental bureaucracy, Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida flatly refuses to participate in the federal commodities program. The guidelines for distribution of government surplus items such as cheese, dried milk and beans require that qualified individuals stand in line to receive them. Food banks may not take delivery of, inventory nor distribute these products. This plan is not acceptable to Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida:

"It's demeaning," says Margaret Linnane, "as well
as dangerous in the Florida heat. Fifty-seven percent of our clients do not have a car. To reach the
distribution point on public transportation, stand in line for hours and then attempt to transport perishable food
safely is ridiculous."

Until efforts to pass legislation changing the rigid restrictions governing the distribution of federal commodities, Second Harvest Food Bank of Orlando will refuse to participate.

The Food Purchase program allows Second Harvest to purchase foodstuffs seldom donated. Often the ethnicity of clients determines what food items should be purchased. At one time pinto beans were in constant surplus. The growing Hispanic population, for whom beans are a staple, now makes this a volume purchase item.

Disaster Relief makes food and supplies available in the wake of floods, hurricanes, tornadoes or fires. Over a quarter million pounds of food, personal care items and cleaning supplies were distributed after the deadly tornadoes of 1997 in central Florida. Often grant money is used to finance special-need or disaster situations. The Orlando Sentinel Charities Fund contributed $100,000 to offset the cost of the tornado aid.

Contributions such as this help raise the 1.9 million dollar budget of Second Harvest. Government funds comprise only a tiny fraction. Fifteen thousand dollars, for example, is Orange County’s allocation, with the stipulation that it be used only for the distribution of prepared food. Forty-eight per cent of the total budget comes from donations, twelve per cent
from the United Way. Special events, such as Taste of the Nation, corporate golf tournaments and Cropwalk (Central Florida Walk for the Hungry sponsored by The Church World Service) make up three percent. Program fees (14 cents per pound of food charged to agencies) account for the remainder of the budget.

Who are the hungry among us? The results of an extensive 1997 study by Second Harvest Food Bank provide some surprising data. Second Harvest surveyed its member agencies and food programs to establish exactly who was receiving the nearly one billion pounds of food “harvested” annually in our country. Only eleven percent of food recipients reported no income for the month prior to the survey. Fifty percent of households had one working adult. “The working poor in our country pose a huge problem,” says Margaret Linnane, Executive Director of the Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida. “The transition from welfare to work is not working.”

Volunteers at food distribution sites often believe that they are servicing the homeless, the indigent, the unemployed poor. The statistics provided in the Second Harvest study, *Hunger: The Faces and the Facts*, tell a different story. People who have found employment and taken themselves off welfare rolls do not earn wages sufficient to support their families. Decisions must be made about allocating limited resources. “If the choice is between paying rent and buying food, then the rent is paid and the family turns to a food pantry,” explains Margaret Linnane. Fifty
percent of households receiving charitable food donations contain one working adult and thirty-eight percent of all recipients are children. The federal poverty level for a family of four is an annual income of at or below $16,050. Eighty percent of food program clients have an annual income under $15,500. Statistics such as these reveal an alarming number of Americans working for wages too low to maintain even a modest standard of living—one that provides three meals per day. Breaking this cycle of poverty is crucial to solving the problem of hunger.

There are twenty-six paid employees on the staff of Second Harvest Food Bank—all paid substantially more than minimum wage. This was a Board of Directors decision—a small step to break the cycle that necessitates food banks.

Hunger, like homelessness, is not a problem, it is a symptom. Ironically, we in America have become experts at treating the symptom, ignoring, in many cases, the root cause of poverty.

"Fighting hunger has become a national pastime," states Janet Poppendieck in her controversial book, *Sweet Charity*? This critical analysis of food programs sheds a harsh light on volunteer efforts:

Charity is not simply something we offer to people we see as our equals. The transactions in soup kitchens and food pantries undermine our cultural commitments to equality by daily defining people who use emergency food as appropriate objects of charity. . . We become a society of givers and receivers, rather than a commonwealth of fellow citizens. Charity erodes the cultural prerequisites for a vigorous democracy. (254-255)
If Poppendieck's position is valid, then a serious examination of charity versus Communitarian efforts is in order. Charity is most often the "giver to receiver" variety. Those who have give to those who have less. This concerns Poppendieck in terms of the underlying inequality. "Charity, after all," she says, "is typically something we give to people who are not like us. (306)

The "commonwealth of fellow citizens" to which she refers is the goal of the Communitarian, to involve all members of the community, including recipients, in meeting needs. Habitat for Humanity successfully makes a partner of the home recipient. A home, however, is a once in a lifetime commitment; hunger must be addressed daily.

While some food banks provide social services such as counseling, most focus on the primary goal of feeding the hungry. With its Biblical backing and tremendous community support, food security, with a minimum of governmental funding and/or participation is hugely effective in its mission. The seeming simplicity and obvious effectiveness of this effort in the United States is a tribute to the thousands of volunteers as well as the corporate generosity that funds it. When asked if most corporations who support Second Harvest do so for the tax write-off, Margaret Linnane smiled. "Actually, only a few of them are concerned about taxes. Most of them say they do it because it's the right thing to do."
Can something that makes people feel good about themselves have a downside? Is it wrong to ladle soup and then return to the comforts of a suburban home, far removed from the site and realities of poverty and homelessness? John Witchger, a Catholic Charities employee who works with migrant workers in Immokalee, Florida puts it this way:

In the worst analysis, it is an awful thing—what we’re doing is allowing an oppressive system to continue. We’re enabling minimum wage jobs to continue at minimum wage. . .we’re providing a safety net, and I know that you can see that from the numbers—when there’s full employment here, we may see four or five clients, ten clients a day. When there’s no work, our numbers are forty, forty-five a day.

( Poppendieck, 268)

Can an effort as successful as food procurement for those in need enable a failing system? The mission statement of Second Harvest promises more than food:

Because no one should be hungry, and nutritious food should never go to waste, the mission of the Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida is to alleviate hunger through:

*efficient procurement and distribution of wholesome, donated food;
*effective community education regarding the causes and consequence of and the solutions to hunger; and
*meaningful action on behalf of individuals and families in need.

(Second Harvest Annual Report '98)

What form does this “meaningful action” take? Are there sufficient hours and dollars to address the root causes of hunger when such a concerted and efficient effort is being made to feed those in need? Such questions must be addressed before kudos are offered for the success of most food programs.
A Communitarian Response to Contemporary Problems

Chapter Five: Somebody Home

Together with his sister, the boy is our most precious possession. . . he and his pack can hunt for happiness either constructively or destructively. Our first problem is to find him constructive joy, instead of destructive glee.

Herbert Hoover

These words from our thirty-first president could easily be attributed to the current office holder. "Destructive glee" well describes the underlying emotion of the spate of vicious crimes committed late in the twentieth century, whose coverage dominates the front page of every urban daily paper. Children, once the innocent victims of crimes, have become the perpetrators. Federal legislation aimed at reversing this trend takes the form of gun control, curfews, and increased funding for neighborhood police officers. None of these measures addresses the real issue: Millions of children are unsupervised for large blocks of time, during after school hours most particularly.

Is there an effective, Communitarian response to this problem? Empty homes and latchkey kids are commonplace in the late nineteen nineties. The majority of American families have two working parents or are single-parent families. Ideally, after school a student opens the door to video games, overflowing bookshelves, snack crackers and juice, an adult to
help with homework. A suburban home? No, the Boys & Girls Club of America.

Here is a truly Communitarian community-within-a-community: A safe, affordable neighborhood location for children who would otherwise be unsupervised.

Now the fastest growing youth organization in the nation, "The Boys' Club," (as it was known for over one hundred years) was started in 1860 by a group of women in Hartford, Connecticut. Known as the "Dashaway Club," this attempt to provide guidance and recreation for disadvantaged youth was disrupted by the Civil War. The term "boys' club" was first used officially in 1876 for the Boys' Club of New York on the lower East side. (Hall, 6) Branches opened up and down the east coast until, in 1906, a national organization, the Federated Boys' Club, was created.

From 1860 through 1900 new Boys' Clubs opened at the rate of one per year. In 1972 the organization reached its goal of 1000 clubs serving one million boys. In 1980 the apostrophe was dropped and a symbol of clasped hands was adopted. The name officially became The Boys & Girls Club of America in 1990. While American society was less apt to permit unchaperoned and unsupervised females at the turn of the century, there is clearly a need today for all children to have a safe and supervised environment. Forty percent of the clientele today is young women. There are over 2000 clubs serving nearly three million children from the ages of six through eighteen.
Each member club is separate, autonomous, and nonprofit. While elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition are embraced in the mission statement, the organization is completely non-sectarian. However, individual clubs may, and often do, decide to offer Bible study or daily devotional time as an option to its members.

Each club has a corporate board, a paid staff, and a host of volunteers. The goal of the club is not to raise children, but to support or supplement parental efforts. There are rules, but every effort is made to accommodate children who have never experienced discipline of any type. Emphasis is placed on the positive—attitude, atmosphere and reinforcement. The mission statement of the Boys & Girls Club comprises a straightforward, non-sectarian goal:

To inspire and enable all young people especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible and caring citizens.

(Youth Development)

Activities at individual centers include tutoring and homework assistance ("Power Hour" held each day after school), SMART Moves, a drug, alcohol and pregnancy prevention program, and Broader Horizons, a career exploration program that exposes students to options in the working world.

With less media attention than either MADD or Habitat for Humanity receives, Gary Cain, President of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida,
acknowledges that his organization is “under the radar screen” in terms of its visibility in neighborhoods. With locations in school, homeless shelters and recreation centers, many citizens are unaware of their existence and function.

Although there is a minimal membership fee (typically thirty dollars per year per child), no income verification is required for a child to belong. No fees are collected at clubs located at homeless shelters. Nominal fees of ten dollars per week cover up to fifteen hours of after school child care. Some locations send their own vans to neighborhood schools, in other cases students ride a school bus to the nearest Boys & Girls Club. Clubs are typically open after school until 9:00 p.m. and during the summer from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. Elementary school students may attend from 3:00 until 6:00 p.m., middle schoolers from 4:00 until 7:00 and high schoolers from 6:00 until 9:00. When counties opt for year-round school calendars, area Boys & Girls Clubs add “Intercession” hours to provide a supervised option for the weeks of school vacation such scheduling creates.

A subtle shift in the values of our country is evident in the changing demographics of the Boys’ & Girls’ Clubs. The affluent community of West Palm Beach, Florida, has an active chapter. Designed for disadvantaged youth, once only the children of unemployed or low income blue-collar parents were in attendance. Now, with increasing numbers of single
parents and two-family incomes, the clubs are frequently used for affordable child care. "Somebody needs to be home," says Gary Cain.

Somebody is always home at the Boys & Girls Club. Empty homes generate latchkey kids with immediate needs—food and supervision. Morning snacks and noon lunches are provided at all club locations. At the Kids Café located in Orlando, dinner, a service of Second Harvest Food Bank, is served three evenings a week.

In the central Florida area Boys and Girls Club members are 73% minority, 55% from single parent families, and 67% qualify (under Federal guidelines) as economically disadvantaged. (Shaping the Future, 4)

While Boys & Girls Clubs of America receive substantial corporate donations, it is incumbent upon local affiliates to raise the bulk of their annual budgets. Funding comes from membership fees (over 5000 children are enrolled as members in central Florida), an annual Campaign for Kids, the United Way Agency, and a Capital/Endowment Campaign launched in March of 1999. The Capital campaign goal is twelve million dollars, most of which is targeted for construction or improvement of facilities in neighborhoods with growing demands for services.

The approximate cost to offer services at a Boys & Girls Club is approximately $700 per child member per year. To meet its goal of serving over 7500 children (a 50% increase over the present 5300) as
well as to maintain and renovate current facilities and build new ones, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida have launched a twelve million dollar capital campaign. While this seems a lofty goal, on an annual, national basis, the Boys & Girls Clubs annually raise more money than the Boy Scouts of America organization.

Much support comes from community leaders and professional athletes who themselves were Boys & Girls Club members. Their testimonies resonate with conviction and Communitarian themes: "With the ever-changing challenges that kids face today, teaching them responsibility is key in building character," says Otis Smith of the Orlando Magic basketball team. Smith recalls that his athletic skills were honed at the Jacksonville, Florida Boys & Girls Club where he played basketball every Saturday, yet his focus for today's youth is responsibility for themselves.

Ninth Judicial Circuit Judge William Gridley remembers football as his Boys Club sport of choice. "The need for structured activities after school is great," he says. "Finding programs, whether they be sports, education or culturally-oriented, can make a difference in keeping a child on the right track." (Future, 3) Alumni voices are an important advertising tool for the Club, as well as a valuable resource in youth development programs.

Communitarians emphasize the importance of the function of the family in a period where it seems to be a lower priority than for past
generations. Etzioni expresses concern about the neglect of the 'parenting industry':

Nobody likes to admit it, but between 1960 and 1990 American society allowed children to be devalued, while the golden call of "making it" was put on a high pedestal."

(Spirit, 63)

While "making it" economically is clearly the right of every American, so is care of children the responsibility of every individual who chooses to become a parent. There is clearly a parenting void for many children in our country.

Adults at the Boys & Girls Club often become surrogate parents, offering those things, physical and emotional, which families are unable or unwilling to provide. While not the Communitarian ideal of a nurturing, two-parent family, the Club clearly identifies, and meets, a pressing need in our country.

Crucial to this effort of the Boys & Girls Club to fill the parenting void is the time commitment of thousands of volunteers. Paid staff form a skeleton crew at each of the thirteen central Florida facilities, but volunteers do the bulk of tutoring, mentoring and coaching each day. Fortunately, the after school hours, when demand is highest, are also after work hours for most volunteers. Any individual over the age of sixteen is welcome to volunteer, and rosters contain the names of high schoolers through senior citizens.
Volunteer talents are used to reinforce the five areas of “opportunity building” stressed by the Boys & Girls Club:

1. Community Service
2. Self-Esteem Building
3. Career Exploration and Training
4. Education
5. Youth Leadership Development

Sharing Habitat for Humanity’s philosophy of recipient as volunteer, community service projects engage Boys & Girls Club members in neighborhood improvement projects. Community service opportunities such as neighborhood clean-ups, paint-and-fix up sessions for senior citizens and “adopt a road” campaigns engage children in caring for their own environment. Responsibility for oneself and one's environment are stressed through these efforts.

Self-esteem building is evident in the one-on-one tutoring and mentoring sessions held daily during “Power Hour.” Perhaps it is even more evident in the inherent trust in each child reflected in this line from the mission statement:

The Club is “For all youth ages 6 to 18 regardless of sex, race, religion or proof of good character.”

Gary Cain explains this commitment:

There are consequences for negative behavior, but a child is removed only if he is disruptive or a danger to himself or others. We work to the ‘nth’ degree with any child.
Such a dedication to the unruly child is unusual. Many community programs refuse to accept children with discipline problems. This family-like acceptance of the Club is perhaps the most important element of the self-esteem building portion of the mission.

To foster the career exploration and training goal, community businesses send speakers and invite children to job-shadow. Many of the volunteer tutors are career people who share their professional experiences with students.

The commitment to the fourth goal, education, is evident during “Power Hour.” For the first hour after school, all students complete homework with the assistance of paid staff members and volunteers. Homework is checked before a student is allowed to pursue the other activities offered. A small bank of computers is available at each Club location, as well as encyclopedias and other reference books.

Youth leadership development programs are reflected in the posters decorating the walls at each Club site. Clever captions caution against teen parenthood, drug activity and crime. Role-playing and peer counseling are important aspects of all levels of programming.

Foster grandparents are invaluable volunteers at some Boys & Girls Clubs, supervising and sharing crafts and stories. Senior groups often share space with the Club operation, holding meetings when the children are in school.
No child is allowed to join the Boys & Girls Club without the participation of at least one parent in an orientation session. This session outlines the rules of the center, stresses safety issues and welcomes input. Children must be picked up by a parent or approved adult at the end of each session, and careful records are kept of the individuals who are allowed to take a child from the Club.

A visit to a Boys & Girls Club is an enlightening experience as an after school stop at the Altamonte Springs, Florida Club proves. The facility is an impressive five thousand feet structure that backs up to a city park. The building interior is immaculate, with all games and materials neatly organized. A director and his assistant introduce themselves and explain that on Fridays, students who have no homework may skip “Power Hour” in favor of games. Four pool tables occupy seven or eight of the children, who are supervised by foster grandparents. Two boys play a computer video game while a girl in the same room did her homework—an option available even in the absence of “Power Hour.” Fewer than a dozen children are inside a center which could easily accommodate up to fifty. “This is the first week of school,” director Al Holt explains. “We’re not up to speed yet. Parents come in every day and ask about our programs.” He predicts that the enrollment will double by Labor Day.

The Boys and Girls Club at the Orlando Coalition for the Homeless is quite a contrast to the suburban location. Housed in a modular, rather than permanent structure, it provides cramped quarters for the dozens of
children who frequent it. There is a tiny, fenced play area adjoining the building. This facility is home to both the Club and the “Cool School,” an Orange County Public School for the residents of the Coalition.

The transient nature of this Club’s membership poses many challenges. Volunteers may never see the same child twice, making successful mentoring and tutoring difficult, if not impossible. Homeless children have special needs and fears. A group of high school students sharing a craft project that involved candy were amazed by the reactions to the activity. Several students ate all of the edible material put before them, and one little boy stuffed his shorts with candy, “in case I get hungry later.” Assured that all of the children are fed while residents of the Coalition, they vowed to return with a more permanent project.

Several months later, after gathering boxes full of new children’s books, they scheduled a reading activity. The children (a totally different group) were delighted to be read to, and ecstatic when they were told they could keep the books. Although the original plan had been to restock the shelves of the Boys & Girls Club “library,” not one of the volunteers could say no. As the group began to clean up in preparation for departure, one child asked if he could please keep one of the empty book boxes to build a bookshelf. Another asked for one to give to his mother to use as a night stand. A debriefing session was held to allow the volunteers to process the impact of such need.
The Boys & Girls Clubs of America provide individuals with the opportunity to put the value back in child raising, to make a difference in a life, and in a community. More important, the organization ensures that for millions of young people across our nation, “somebody is home.”
A Communitarian Response to Contemporary Problems

Chapter Six: The Continuing Challenge

In the same way that third party politics may someday outdistance Republicans and Democrats, Communitarianism is a new political creed that may outdistance liberalism and conservatism. Alan Winkler

"Outdistancing liberal and conservative philosophies" is not a goal of the Communitarian agenda unless such a political coup accompanies a restoration of the moral order of our society. Encouraging people to recognize and accept their responsibilities does not mean, as many liberals fear, jeopardizing their rights. A sense of responsibility to one's community is neither a revolutionary, nor new, concept. Etzioni acknowledges: "Communitarian ideas have been around since the Old Testament, and certainly the ancient Greeks." (Chicago Times) Though he himself is the first to point out that his ideas are not original, he is still heralded as a pioneer in political circles:

Amitai Etzioni has been a communitarian pioneer, not simply because he has been a communitarian—many have preceded him—but because he has adapted communitarian ideas to the purposes of concrete and non-reactionary public policy, even as he has labored to harmonize a communitarian interest in civic responsibility with a liberal concern for individual rights. (Barber, 99)

Concrete, Communitarian, grassroots efforts can and do make a difference in the fabric of American society. Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Habitat for Humanity, Second Harvest Food Bank and the Boys & Girls Clubs are but four examples of organizations that continue to change communities in a positive
way. They provide tangible, hands-on support to hundreds of thousands of Americans each day. Each fills a void in our society that government responses have no hope of addressing, encumbered as they are by partisan and bureaucratic agendas. Each makes a difference in the lives of individuals precisely because it is other individuals providing the needed assistance. Those individuals possess, as Robert Coles aptly puts it in his book, The Call of Service, “the impulse to engage themselves in a broken world and find a place for their moral energy.” (Coles, 48)

It is this “moral energy” in an increasingly “broken world” that Communitarians urge us to find and harness. Yet with fresh criticism of the movement so readily available, it is apparent that much energy is channeled, not in the direction of need in our society, but in the fueling of outrage at rights compromised or lost. The positive endeavors of the four organizations examined in this study clearly demonstrate the power of cooperative moral energies directed at solving specific problems. The dilemma remains: Do the benefits of successful Communitarian efforts justify possible threats to individual freedoms?

While each of the groups has its critics, Mothers Against Drunk Driving has experienced the most public outcry and legal challenges to its efforts. Owning and operating a vehicle is a hallmark of an affluent and individual-centered society. Only a handful of American cities (most notably New York) embrace and utilize public transportation systems. For most areas, an individual mode of transportation is an essential element of the pursuit of the good life. Legislation that threatens this cherished tradition by imposing fines, impounding vehicles or
suspending and revoking licenses generates both verbal and legal opposition. The reforms sought by Mothers Against Drunk Driving are designed to protect everyone. If such protection for all citizens means removal of a few drivers from our roadways, MADD makes no apology; the greater good is served.

Though unencumbered by the types of criticism directed at MADD, Habitat for Humanity faces some of the same criticisms and issues raised by those who question the validity of food programs: Only one aspect of a larger problem is addressed. Shelter is but one need—a roof over one’s head does not guarantee freedom from hunger or poverty. Yet the effort builds thousands of quality, affordable homes each year, improves neighborhoods and works to eliminate substandard housing. These goals are accomplished with the cooperative involvement and sweat, as well as the passionate commitment of the volunteer builders and future homeowners. The involvement of the recipient in the construction removes the “handout” aspect of community service that many find offensive. Habitat for Humanity building sites are level ground for true Communitarian action. None of the soup kitchen social strata of “haves” and “have nots” exists when beneficiary and recipient each wield a hammer.

To address the types of concerns later raised by Janet Poppendieck in *Sweet Charity*, Second Harvest Food Bank expanded its mission in 1994 to include “education and other means” of supporting families in need. It often acts as an information and referral service for individuals whose needs go beyond food (as most clients’ needs do). The mission statement is deliberately broad in its wording to allow the agency to assist in special situations. During the summer
of 1999, an Orlando medical facility, Princeton Hospital, closed its doors without warning. Employees, unpaid for three weeks prior to the closing, received no final compensation. Emergency food supplies were provided to stock local food pantries to meet the immediate and pressing needs of those affected by this sudden closing.

Second Harvest Food Bank also provides food to several venues that specialize in feeding children directly. These include a Boys and Girls Club in Margaret Square in Winter Park and three public housing projects. All locations serve meals to kids from ages three to eighteen, but parents are encouraged to assist in the serving and to join their children at meals.

While these programs go beyond the stocking of food pantries, Second Harvest never loses sight of its primary function, food security. The organization realizes, and Janet Poppendieck concedes, that:

...the volunteers and professionals who staff the charitable food programs are modern-day saints. Without them, millions more people in this nation would go hungry, and for the 35 million already classified by the government as hungry and food-insecure, things would be even more tragic.

(Brown, 382)

Tragic indeed, if the resources and energies devoted to food security were suddenly re-channeled, even for the lofty goal of tackling the root problem of poverty. People would go hungry. This presents an ironic dilemma for Communitarians: The food security efforts of privately funded organizations are so successful that our nation depends on them. How then to deal with the inequities of society that create such a tremendous need? The solution is
complex because the problem is complex. Poverty has many faces, many
causes. The answer may lie in Millard Fuller's simple approach of one house,
one family at a time. If every church, synagogue, school and civic group in our
nation adopted one family in need to provide the counseling, support and
guidance needed to help that family help itself, perhaps the vicious cycle of
poverty could be broken. Such an effort, though idealistic, would be truly
Communitarian.

The Boys and Girls Clubs of America may be the least controversial of the
four organizations. Its efforts parallel the rapid growth of the day care industry in
our country, but Clubs provide much more than child care. One-on-one services
such as tutoring, mentoring, coaching and career counseling deal with each
child's special needs. More important, the efforts of The Boys and Girls Clubs
have been consistent, non-profit and non-sectarian for over one hundred years.
The need for supervision of children is greater now than it was at the turn of the
century. The Boys and Girls Clubs continue to provide "somebody at home" for
children all over the United States.

Communitarian thought is a philosophy whose time has come.


Cain, Gary. President, Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida, Inc. Personal interview. 8 June 1999.


Jepson, Christopher. Executive Director Orlando Habitat for Humanity. Personal interview. 12 March 1999.

Linnane, Margaret S. Executive Director Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida. Personal interview. 28 May 1999.


Morris, Kasey, Executive Director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Personal interview. 10 February 99.


Seymour, Thad. Executive Director, Habitat for Humanity of Winter Park and Maitland. Personal interview. 23 March 1999.
