

**BUILDING THOUGHTFUL COMMUNITIES  
OF THE MIND, HEART, AND DEED**

Review Essay by David Yamada

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**Books Discussed**

Derrick Bell, *Ethical Ambition* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002)

Steven Biel, *Independent Intellectuals in the United States, 1910-1945* (New York: New York University Press, 1992)

Jane Bethke Elshtain, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2002)

Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002)

Julius Getman, *In the Company of Scholars* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1992)

Ronald Gross, *The Independent Scholar's Handbook* (Reading, Mass.: Addison/Wesley, 1982)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Peak Learning* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1991)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Socrates' Way* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2002)

Donald E. Hall, *The Academic Self* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2002)

Kathleen Hirsch, *A Home in the Heart of a City* (New York: North Point Press, 1998)

Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970)

Stacy Horn, *Cyberville* (New York: Warner, 1998)

Rachel W. Jacobsohn, *The Reading Group Handbook* (New York: Hyperion, 1998)

Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987);

Carol Lloyd, *Creating a Life Worth Living* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997)

Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (New York: Paragon House, 1989)

Laura Pappano, *The Connection Gap* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001)

Christopher Phillips, *Socrates Café* (New York: Norton, 2002)

Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Touchstone, 2000)

Paul H. Ray & Sherry Ruth Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives* (New York: Harmony Books, 2000)

Jaida N'Ha Sandra, et al., *Salons* (Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society, 2001)

Carolyn R. Shaffer & Kristen Amundsen, *Creating Community Anywhere* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1993)

Gail Sheehy, *New Passages* (New York: Random House, 1995)

Christine Stansell, *American Moderns* (New York: Metropolitan, 2000)

Ross Wetzsteon, *Republic of Dreams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002)

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...(W)insome young women throw morality to the winds (along with their Victorian corsets) in ardent love affairs, golden young men plot peaceful revolution, poets and playwrights conceive their creations in scintillating talk in late-night cafés. Everyone knows everyone else; politics are thrillingly efficacious and entertaining, not dull and dutiful. Small knots of intimates lead thousands in fiery demonstrations, captivate thousands more with their radical journals, impress sophisticated Manhattanites with their homegrown avant-garde theatre. A tipsy crowd of revelers climbs to the top of the arch in Washington Square to declare Greenwich Village an independent nation. Everyone is always dancing wildly, discoursing eloquently, flirting, making friends or making love; rents are low, apartments charming, and restaurants cheap (Stansell, 2).

For many of us who intersect, frequently or occasionally, with the spheres of scholarship, activism, and creativity, Christine Stansell's images of the Greenwich Village intellectuals of the early twentieth century conjure up a romantic ideal of lives steeped in ideas and action. Populated by the likes of writer John Reed (*Ten Days That Shook the World*), radical activist Emma Goldman, and poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, the Village of nearly a century ago seemed to be, however briefly, the intellectual boiling pot for a cultural and political revolution.

The Village of that era has been brought back to life in several recent books, including Stansell's *American Moderns*, Steven Biel's *Independent Intellectuals in the United States, 1910-1945*, and the late Ross Wetzstein's *Republic of Dreams*. Anyone who seeks to envision this apparent urban utopia will find in these books plenty of names, places, and events to help fuel a sense of nostalgia for the Village past. The list of countercultural icons who spent time in the Village exceeds the space limitations of this short essay. Consider, however, that playwright Eugene O'Neill, birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, urbanologist Lewis Mumford, writer and social critic Randolph Bourne, journalist Walter Lippman, and "salon keeper" Mabel Dodge were among the other well-known denizens of the Village. They affirmed the magnetic appeal of New York as a city open to radical politics, unconventional art, experimental social mores, and flouting convention in general.

The Village offered a sufficient array of venues in which they could engage in their passionate dialogues. For example, in 1912, Mabel Dodge, a wealthy and bored heiress who had spent the previous eight years in Europe, turned her Village apartment into a salon for the radical intelligentsia. Her guests included "writers, artists,

journalists, socialists, anarchists, feminists, labor leaders, clergyman, psychiatrists, and poets” (Wetzsteon, 15), all of whom posed a threat to the old order. They would debate “radical politics and free love, psychoanalysis and the single tax, birth control and the Wobblies, cubism and women’s suffrage, all the enlightened ideas of the dawning century that they felt certain would cast off the darkness of the past” (ibid.).

There were associations and commercial establishments that catered to the Village crowd. The Liberal Club, a well-known political and social association, made its home in the top level of 137 MacDougal Street, just off of Washington Square Park. On the lower level was Polly Holladay’s restaurant, and right next door was a small bookstore. The circulation of people between the three establishments “undermined any interest in exclusivity that might have lingered” (Stansell, 81). The Village’s “core of leftish intellectuals, writers, and theatre people” (ibid.) was surrounded by a changing cast of drifters, transients, and visitors from many walks of life.

Of course, part of what made this milieu possible was that many of the leading Village citizens avoided whenever possible being encumbered by regular employment. Understandably, they rejected the kind of backbreaking manual labor that still constituted the lion’s share of available jobs in America. But they also tended to eschew the notion of a career path in general. They believed that “(f)ormal employment intruded on creativity by structuring lives and diverting them toward non-productive ends” (Biel, 32). This meant that ostensibly compatible vocations, such as commercial journalism, were deeply frowned upon.

As for universities, critics held that “(t)he mundanities of teaching and the machinations of anti-intellectual governing bodies had prevented scholars from giving

themselves freely to the development of their ideas. Without this freedom, and with the trends toward overspecialization, overqualification, and esoteric knowledge, the university could not serve as the legitimate conduit of ideas into society at large” (ibid., 22). Accordingly, most of the Village intellectuals had little use for the academy.

In short, this collection of visionaries and eccentrics strove to maintain a strong sense of independence from any traditional societal markers. Together “(t)hey made Greenwich Village into a beacon of American possibility in the new age” (Stansell, 3). Whereas stodgy, nineteenth century Boston produced an Emerson and a Thoreau, New York of the new century was the leading incubator for a whole new breed of independent intellectual.

Today, such depictions create the ultimate bohemian fantasy for the perpetual graduate student at heart, a world in which intellectual freedom and unbridled passions (personal, artistic, and political) reign supreme, and where income sources and housing costs are but minor concerns. Of course, for most people the real world eventually intrudes with a vengeance. Rents and mortgages, family responsibilities, a desire for some basic creature comforts, the actual experiences of academic life and political activism, and “growing up” all may conspire to relegate those images to the status of youthful fancy.

Today’s Greenwich Village may be a perfect illustration of how things change. Although the Village still retains much of its historic look and feel, housing prices are exorbitant, and fancy boutiques and eateries have pushed out many of the small shops, cafés, and bookstores. New York University has pretty much taken over the properties in the heart of the Village; for example, 137 MacDougal Street, former home of the

Liberal Club and Polly Holladay's restaurant, is now a satellite building for NYU's ever-expanding School of Law. With the exception of certain rent-controlled apartments, the notion of the Village serving as a colony for independent writers and artists is long gone.

### **An Impossible Dream?**

But maybe we are getting carried away with our nostalgia. This is a very American trait. After all, we just went through a ten-year wave of good feelings about the Second World War, only to be jolted back into the present by September 11. For progressive types who are trying to find their way through this Starbucked, post-Reagan, Reality TV era, Greenwich Village circa 1915 may look like a paradise, especially through rose-colored glasses.

However, a closer look at the lives of the Villagers suggests that some of our nostalgia may be misplaced. While the Village of that time may have constituted a rare convergence of people, place, and circumstances, it fell short of being a paradise. Take, for example, the question of money. According to Biel, "(b)eneath the sustaining myth of the cult of poverty, those who dismissed the idea of a career faced real problems in trying to create a stable economic basis for an independent intellectual life" (Biel, 48), adding that "cycles of hardship and short-lived security could make the independent intellectual life unstable to the point where claims of autonomy seemed merely wistful" (ibid., 49-50).

Those who could draw on trust funds and family wealth, of course, had little to worry about. But for many of the Village independent intellectuals, money was an ongoing and critical concern. Randolph Bourne, for example, wrote of the "hideous"

and “appalling” stress and uncertainty of poverty; he lived “most of his life as a writer on the edge of subsistence” (ibid., 48).

At times the Villagers had to resort to assistance from those they resented. Walter Lippmann, for example, was considered a defector to commercial journalism. Nevertheless, Lippmann, “who had the most stable economic basis for the free life of letters,” would serve “as a kind of clearinghouse for intellectuals, many of whom approached him in search of temporary jobs or publishers” (ibid., 51).

Even more disturbing in political terms was the way in which the Village was absent even the faintest stirrings of a civil rights movement concerning race in America. Radical politics and women’s suffrage were among the rallying cries of the day, but racial equality was not. According to Stansell, the racism “ran so deep it went unmentioned” (Stansell, 67). Of the many groups that crossed into the Village bohemia of the early twentieth century, blacks were not among them. Had the issue been forced, a black person probably would not “even have been served in a Village restaurant in 1910” (ibid.). As for Mabel Dodge and her renowned salon, “she was happy to entertain the cream of the Lower East Side, skimmed off from the masses of the immigrant poor, but her hospitality did not extend to black New Yorkers, whose Opinions never seemed to have mattered” (ibid., 104).

The political passion that inspired many of the Village intellectuals sometimes gave way to heartbreaking defeat, or worse. For example, Stansell gives a poignant account of events leading to the 1919 deportation of Emma Goldman, who was ordered to leave the country on a “Red Ark” to Russia after having been found guilty of seditious activities against the United States:

Publicly, she embraced her destiny as providential: hers was not the tragic narrative of persecution and loss but a victorious story of the exile's return. She ordered her attorney to stop all appeals and inform the immigration authorities that she *demand*ed to be sent to Russia. . . . Privately, however, the grief was almost unbearable. . . . She mulled over her ambivalent, profound devotion to America and the severed dreams of the work she still wanted to do there. The land that had cost her so much suffering had also, she confessed, given her great joy (Stansell, 325).

The long-term political influence of the Village independent intellectuals also must seriously be questioned. The Villagers "centered around an insistence on the transforming power of ideas" in strategizing about social change (Biel, 54). "Removed from conventional positions of power and decision," they "tried to create alternative modes of influence" while maintaining their independence (ibid., 55). In addition to engaging in political activism and dialogue, they invested their energies in alternative journalism, creating periodicals such as *The Masses* and signing on to write for the then-new (and very liberal) *New Republic*.

By opting out of more conventional ways in which to share their political messages, however, the Village intellectuals placed self-imposed limitations on their own influence. In repudiating the academy, they reduced the likelihood that progressive voices would be heard in college classrooms – though it must be conceded that during the height of the Red Scare, it is questionable whether any instructor espousing leftist views would have been retained. Their reluctance to engage in electoral politics, law reform efforts (despite that several were lawyers), and government service also limited their collective reach.

When all was said and done, it probably was good that their imagined revolution never occurred. Many of the Villagers were enamored of Communism and events in Russia, and some would turn a blind eye to the horrific excesses of Joseph Stalin. (Max

Eastman, an editor of *The Masses* and prominent activist, eventually found himself unable to get his work published because he had vocally *opposed* Stalin!) In view of how the rest of the century would turn, even those of us to the left of center would be hard pressed to argue that they got it right on Russia and Communism in general.

### **Enduring Dilemmas and the Search for a Grown Up Bohemia**

So perhaps we should not feel too deprived if our lives lack the drama, passion, and revolutionary spirit of the life of a John Reed or Emma Goldman. And yet . . . despite the onset of reality . . . I believe there remains in many people a yearning for a life of the mind that extends beyond the mundane. In fact, those who are drawn to ideas, progressive social change, the cultural and performing arts, and a deeper sense of community may be destined to become restless in, and dissatisfied with, mainstream American life. I find myself at this juncture today, and it is the focus of a recurring conversation that I have with friends and associates.

Many of these questions can be examined through the lens of Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, a 1970 analysis of how individuals respond to decline in, and dissatisfaction with, existing institutions. In the face of decline and dissatisfaction, "some members leave the organization," thereby exercising their "*exit option*" (Hirschman, 4). Others will remain and express their concerns "directly to management or to some other authority to which management is subordinate or through general protest to anyone who cares to listen," thereby exercising their "*voice option*" (ibid.). In deciding whether to stay or to go, loyalty often is a deciding factor. Hirschman believes that, as a general rule, "loyalty holds exit at bay and activates voice"

(ibid., 78). The stronger one's attachment and affection to an institution, the more likely it is that the individual will remain and use the voice option.

This short summary does not do justice to the nuances of Hirschman's model, but it does help us to understand some of the dilemmas that confronted the Village intellectuals and that continue to bedevil their modern-day counterparts. Many of the Villagers appeared to exercise both exit and voice options, in that they departed from traditional institutions yet retained enough devotion, at a meta-level, to American politics and culture to advocate for change. Stansell's plaintive description of Emma Goldman's deportation to Russia illustrates well the ways in which the Villagers struggled with profoundly ambivalent feelings toward America and its institutions.

Within the context of this essay, Hirschman's model highlights, in particular, questions of mainstream versus alternative institutions and communities:

- Can we maintain a sense of personal integrity and purpose in our political, cultural, and artistic work while functioning within traditional structures and mainstream institutions?
- Is it "worth it" ("it" in this context usually representing some amount of time and emotional energy) to stay within a mainstream construct or institution and try to change it for the better?
- When do we become so "alternative" that we undercut our chances of having a genuine impact on things we care about?

My thinking about these questions has been enriched by a wave of thoughtful books, most of which have appeared during the past ten years, that address community building, intellectual activism, life span development, life planning, political action, and

the academy. Individually they provide ideas, insights, and inspiration on various aspects of these topics; each book, standing on its own, has something useful to offer. Collectively, they suggest to me a tantalizing meeting of the minds -- a grander synergy of some sort -- but I am too early in my thinking to know where that conversation leads. Nevertheless, at this juncture it is worth considering them on an individual basis.

### **Thank Heavens for Second Adulthood**

In their heyday, the Greenwich Village intellectuals were a young group. Most were in their 20s and early 30s when they converged upon New York City; more than a few were just out of college. For those of us who are past those years, the youthfulness of the Village set only seems to underscore the notion that it's time for us to move on and deal with the mainstream.

But maybe there's another way of looking at this. Journalist Gail Sheehy, who has been writing about life transitions for many years, offers a new model of the stages of adulthood in her 1995 book *New Passages*, based on interviews with over 500 adults ages 20 to 70. Longer periods of formal schooling, trends toward later marriages and childbirth, and advances in health care and longer life expectancies now suggest that we should add roughly ten years to previous expectations of life span development. In addition, life is no longer a single linear path; a 30-year-old may spend time living with his parents, and someone in her late 40s may pursue a new career. Traditional adolescent experiences of schooling and experimentation may extend well into someone's 20s, and "50 is now what 40 used to be." Rather than simply lopping all individuals ages 21 to 65 into a single category of working, productive adult, Sheehy proposes a new breakdown:

Provisional Adulthood:	18-30
First Adulthood:	30-45
Second Adulthood:	45-85+

Within each of these stages are subcategories. For example, years 45-65 are an “Age of Mastery,” while years 65 and beyond are an “Age of Integrity.” Sheehy goes on to discuss the possibilities that each of these stages potentially offers, and she takes issue with the notion that the aging process must be one long road to the end.

To some this labeling may sound a bit gimmicky, a way to assure aging Baby Boomers that there is still plenty of time. But I believe a closer look reveals that Sheehy is on to something, that she is drawing together and making sense of trends that have become increasingly clear over the past 20 years. Her conceptualization of life development suggests that the later years of adulthood can be a time of renewal, wisdom, and mastery. For purposes of this discussion, it allows us to speculate that even if the Village of the 1910s, Paris of the 1920s, and Berkeley of the 1960s are beyond re-creation, perhaps, *perhaps*, something better lurks out there.

### **From Demographics to Community?**

Two other recent books, *The Cultural Creatives* and *The Rise of the Creative Class*, raise the notion that a more mature demographic group that embraces the importance of living more meaningful, thoughtful lives may be “out there.” Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, a husband and wife research team, have identified a large section of America, 50 million strong, that they call the “cultural creatives.” In their book, *The Cultural Creatives*, they characterize this group as sharing “serious ecological and planetary perspectives, emphasis on relationships and women’s point of view, commitment to spirituality and psychological development, disaffection with the large

institutions of modern life, including both left and right in politics, and rejection of materialism and status display” (Ray & Anderson, 4). Members of this group are largely unaware of its formation; “it takes shape silently and almost invisibly” (ibid., 3). But once these individuals understand their shared values and the power of their unity, Ray and Anderson believe that they will have a huge impact on shaping the social and political agenda of America during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Richard Florida, a professor specializing in economic development at Carnegie Mellon University, identifies a group of some 38 million people as constituting America’s new “creative class.” “If you are a scientist or engineer, an architect or designer, a writer, artist or musician, or if you use your creativity as a key factor in your work in business, education, health care, law or some other profession, you are a member,” he writes in *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Florida, ix). Members of the creative class tend to value technological advancement, individual talent, and diversity. Cities that are inhabited by large numbers of creative class members are likely to thrive in the future, according to Florida. One important indicator of creative class density is the “Bohemian Index,” which measures the number of “authors, designers, musicians, composers, actors, directors, painters, sculptors, artist printmakers, photographers, dancers, artists, and performers” in a particular geographic area (Florida, 333). Not surprisingly, cities such as Seattle, San Francisco, and Boston rank high on Florida’s Bohemian Index.

Taken together, *The Cultural Creatives* and *The Rise of the Creative Class* paint a picture of an emerging socioeconomic group, grounded in middle class and upper middle class income strata, whose members are highly educated, socially aware, and

drawn to creative endeavors. On issues such as the environment and diversity, they may be quite liberal, but they are not easily pigeonholed in political terms.

Are these the somewhat older counterparts of the Greenwich Village intellectuals, perhaps more moderate in their political outlook but still seeking engaged and meaningful lives? The answer for now is no, or at least not yet. Ray and Anderson concede that the Cultural Creatives “are not yet aware of themselves as a collective body” and thus “do not recognize how powerful their voices could be” (Ray & Anderson, 5). Richard Florida’s Creative Class is more of a demographic group than an emerging social class. It remains to be seen whether these groups, or subgroups drawn from within them, will further coalesce into cohesive communities.

### **Searching for Community**

Social observers are documenting the desire, the need, for meaningful community in modern American life. In *Bowling Alone*, public policy professor Robert Putnam exhaustively documents how Americans have become increasingly disconnected with social structures of all kinds – schools, charity groups, churches, political parties – and from one another. This has led to a decline in “social capital,” those “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”

(Putnam, 19). Journalist Laura Pappano writes in *The Connection Gap*:

People talk a great deal about “community” but complain of feeling less and less a part of one. People long for rich relationships but find themselves wary of committing to others. Many of us hunger for intimacy but end up paying professionals to listen to, care for, and befriend us. We are a bundle of contradictions, eager to feel rooted but finding ourselves willingly pulled along with the tide. As a society, we face a collective loneliness, an empty feeling that comes not from lack of all human interaction, but from a loss of *meaningful* interaction, the failure to be a part of something real, or to have faith in institutions that might bring us together. This is what I call the Connection Gap (Pappano, 8).

The reasons for the Connection Gap are many. They include gated communities, the demise of religious affiliations, television, answering machines, online shopping, excessive demands on time, fewer marriages, and geographic mobility. In other words, a combination of factors, big and small, imposed and self-imposed, is contributing to that collective loneliness and longing for community.

Carolyn Shaffer and Kristen Amundsen learned about this Connection Gap while interviewing people for their book, *Creating Community Anywhere*. “(W)e discovered how deeply people yearn for community,” they write, adding, “we also learned that most don’t know how to begin creating the kind of community they long for” (Shaffer & Amundsen, xiii). They put forth a wide array of suggestions for community building, ranging from the intellectual (e.g., in-person and online salons) to the residential (e.g., shared housing and retirement co-ops).

The lack of informal gathering places in American life may be a significant contributing factor to our sense of isolation. In *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg argues that “distinctive informal public gathering places” (Oldenburg, xv), such as cafés, community centers, coffee shops, and pubs, are essential features of great civilizations, and especially great cities. These “third places” (not home, not work) nurture human relationships and “diversity of human contact” (ibid.). Without them, “people remain lonely within their crowds” (ibid.). Unfortunately, third places are in decline in America, and citizens instead “are encouraged to find their relaxation, entertainment, companionship, even safety, almost entirely within the privacy of homes that have become more a retreat from society than a connection to it” (ibid., xvi).

The importance of place in the building of community is one of the themes of Kathleen Hirsch's *A Home in the Heart of a City*, a 1998 account of life in the Boston neighborhood of Jamaica Plain. Hirsch explains:

When I moved my hand-me-down bookshelves, twenty cases of books, and a handful of flea market vases to Jamaica Plain in the summer of 1990, I was looking for a place to belong. For ten years I'd lived in Boston's [much trendier] Back Bay. It had been fun and fast and anything but routine. . . . Now in my mid-thirties, I was ready to find that thing about which, like most Americans of my generation, I knew close to nothing: community (Hirsch, xvi).

Jamaica Plain is commonly thought of as a once-deteriorating neighborhood on the rebound, with a racially and ethnically mixed population, that has been experiencing an influx of writers, artists, educators, young professionals, new families, many of whom share more liberal political and social outlooks. Hirsch was a part of that wave. After many frustrating forays of house-hunting in Boston's more expensive neighborhoods, she found herself looking in "J.P.," which was "by far the cheapest, riskiest, and least sexy place I ventured into" (ibid.). However, it was precisely J.P.'s unpretentious qualities that made it feel like "the sort of place that might harbor that most rare and vanishing of life-forms, authentic neighborhood life" (ibid.).

*A Home in the Heart of a City* is largely the story of how Hirsch found a genuine sense of community in J.P. As such, it may serve as a living response to the concerns raised in other works discussed here. For example, Hirsch devotes a chapter to Doyle's, a neighborhood Irish pub, which serves as the kind of "third place" whose passing from American life is lamented by Oldenburg. J.P. itself is home to a plethora of community organizations, the likes of which would warm the hearts of Robert Putnam and Laura

Pappano. And many of J.P.'s denizens – artists, teachers, and educators of various types -- could be classified as “Cultural Creatives.”

The irony inherent in Hirsch's narrative is that she, like other members of the Baby Boomer generation, eventually sought what at one point she obviously had rejected: A sense of community grounded in neighborhood life. In a recent e-mail exchange with WISR faculty member Deborah Pruitt about an earlier draft of this essay, we observed how our parents had found their communities amongst neighbors who did not necessarily share the same social or political values, whereas we continued to wrestle with how to find a more defined community based in part on shared political outlooks. Perhaps Hirsch has found a happy median, in that she has become part of a neighborhood where many people share her general worldview but where differences of opinion and personality are tolerated and even welcomed.

### **Lifelong Learning**

A thirst for lifelong learning is an essential element in the quest for personal enlightenment and vocational success, and Ronald Gross is one of the nation's leading authorities on the topic. In *Peak Learning*, Gross presents a comprehensive course for self-education. He delves into personal learning styles and challenges readers to consider how they learn best. He looks at the learning options offered by the “Invisible University,” his term for a catalog of choices that includes continuing education courses, distance learning, bookstores and libraries, museums, the media, and other formal and informal sources.

Gross's latest book is *Socrates' Way*, a wonderfully thoughtful and useful book on how the lessons of Socrates relate to our lives today. In it, he draws heavily from the Socratic dialogues to develop seven core principles for using one's mind to its fullest:

- "Know thyself"
- "Ask great questions"
- "Think for yourself"
- "Challenge convention"
- "Grow with friends"
- "Speak the truth"
- "Strengthen your soul"

Gross builds each of these principles into a chapter, in many ways they all are relevant to this discussion. For example, in the chapter on growing with friends, Gross outlines the many ways in which we can engage people in discussions, drawing upon the lives of Socrates and his associates in ancient Athens. "Socrates and his friends saw conversation, dialogue, meeting together as important and energizing, so they made it so!," writes Gross, adding that these exchanges "clarified the values by which they lived" and "honed their minds, whatever the topic" (Gross, *Socrates' Way*, 147). Random conversations, dinner parties, and discussion groups (virtual and face-to-face) all present opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue.

### **Let's Talk**

Gross is not the only writer who recognizes the importance of dialogue in our lives. During the past decade, the *Utne Reader*, a periodical that has billed itself as the "Reader's Digest of the Alternative Press," has promoted salons and other forms of discussion groups as means for promoting cultural change. Several former and current editors and staff members of the *Utne Reader* have collaborated on *Salons*, a book that brings together many of their ideas about joining, organizing, and energizing salons,

study circles, book clubs, and online discussions. In a similar vein, Rachel Jacobsohn presents a wealth of ideas and techniques on starting book clubs in *The Reading Group Handbook*. She estimates that over 500,000 groups meet in person or online to discuss books. Christopher Phillips shares with Ron Gross a fascination with Socrates. In *Socrates Café*, he outlines ideas for philosophical discussion groups that can be implemented in institutions as varied as coffee shops, prisons, and churches.

Online communities are a burgeoning forum for discussion groups. In the early 1990s, Stacy Horn, a refugee from corporate life and graduate of an innovative master's degree program in interactive telecommunications at NYU, created Echo ("East Coast Hang Out"), an online virtual salon based in lower Manhattan. Her 1998 book, *Cyberville*, captures much of the flavor of this self-styled "online town." Throughout the day and night, Echoids dial in and participate in a wide variety of ongoing discussions about popular culture, the arts, politics, television and movies, relationships, books, and even sports. Many Echoids also gather for face-to-face events, ranging from nights hanging out in Village bars to readings by Echoids from their latest books and stories.

I was an early joiner of Echo, and I have been an on and off member since then. For an online community, it has a familiar, even intimate feel. There is no anonymity on this board; anyone can type in a quick request and see what names are attached to what online handles. Personalities enter into the picture, and the dialogue can be witty, intense, supportive, confrontational, and occasionally flaming. Echoids lean to the arts rather than to politics, and the level of discussion can be quite high. On occasion it can be positively riveting: During September 11 and its aftermath, I spent hours upon hours

on Echo, reading and participating in the ongoing discussion. It was an unforgettable experience to be living in Boston while engaged in an ongoing dialogue with Echoids in New York.

### **Pursuing Passions and Day Jobs**

The Village intellectuals may have been unable to face the necessity of an income, but Carol Lloyd's *Creating a Life Worth Living* does it in a supportive but hard-nosed way. The book is touted as a "practical course in career design for aspiring writers, artists, filmmakers, musicians, and others who want to make a living from their creative work," interspersing advice with profiles of creative people. In a very matter-of-fact way, Lloyd confronts the financial and vocational angst of the Village intellectuals by outlining the available strategies for emerging writers and artists.

For example, in a very sensible chapter about "day jobs," she considers the types of income-producing employment that can support an individual. For a budding writer, journalism may be educational, interesting, and enriching, but it also can exhaust writing energy, become very time consuming, and put one on an unwanted career track. By contrast, working as a retail bookseller can be easy, thoughtless work that keeps one around books, but it also is low paying and repetitious. In this straightforward way, Lloyd faces the fact that, absent a trust fund or some other form of support, creative people may need to work a "day job" to sustain the work that truly inspires them. Her sobering but practical and hopeful advice may be worth more than many of the romanticized images of Greenwich Village life.

## **Independent Scholarship**

Ron Gross's *The Independent Scholar's Handbook* was an inspiration to me as a first-year law student at New York University, when I wrestled with the highly structured and inflexible nature of the standard first-year law curriculum. I found solace in a book that recognized that many other things were worth reading besides the words of appellate judges. The title of the book just about says it all. Gross writes for individuals who are engaged, or who want to be engaged, in scholarly work, but who find themselves, by choice or circumstance, outside of traditional academic circles. If intellectual life is to be nurtured and supported outside of the university, then the themes and ideas raised in *The Independent Scholar's Handbook* must be given serious attention. Gross deftly interweaves specific advice on topics such as identifying research resources, obtaining funding, and establishing intellectual partnerships, with vivid accounts of successful independent scholars. Barbara Tuchman (*The Guns of August*), Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*), and Alvin Toffler (*Future Shock*) are just a few of Gross's more notable examples.

The story of Jane Jacobs, author of the 1961 classic, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, is a textbook example of the importance of independent scholarship. Jacobs, who is mentioned favorably several times in Gross's book, is not a full-time academic and did not receive formal academic training in urban studies or any similar discipline. Nevertheless, her book challenged the then-dominant urban design orthodoxy that engaged sterile high-rises and valued automobiles over foot traffic. Many of the ideas of this largely self-taught urbanologist, such as the importance of

mixed-use city space and small city blocks, have prevailed over those of the most prominent academics of her time.

Independent scholarship takes on even greater importance in view of what is and is not going on with the academy. As discussed above, one major criticism of the academy is that work done within the academy has become too narrow and specialized to be of use to the broader public. In addition, the number of entry-level full-time tenure-track teaching positions at colleges and universities has been shrinking as full-time slots have been replaced by much lower paid part-time faculty. Independent scholarship helps to ensure that, regardless of what happens within academe, the life of the mind will endure.

### **The Academy**

And what about the academy? Recall Steven Biel's observation that "overspecialization," "overqualification," and "anti-intellectual governing bodies" were among the liberal criticisms of American higher education during the turn of the last century. Compare this to Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals*, a 1987 book that argues that universities, their tenure systems, and their seemingly inevitable evolution towards narrower academic specialization have all but obliterated the role of the scholar who writes critical commentary for a broader audience. Jacoby's work has triggered an intense debate among academics over what and who is a "public intellectual." Since his book appeared, journals and universities have sponsored conferences and symposia on public intellectuals, a noted conservative jurist, Richard Posner, has written a book that purports to identify America's leading public intellectuals, and one university, Florida Atlantic University, has started a Ph.D. program to prepare students to become public

intellectuals. The allegation that the university has abandoned its obligation to serve the broader society continues to drive many of these discussions and endeavors.

Of course, this is but one of the many criticisms leveled at the academy. One of the most thoughtful examinations of traditional academic values and university life comes from Julius Getman, a law professor at the University of Texas and author of *In the Company of Scholars*. Getman would seem an unlikely candidate to write a strong critique of the academy, as he appears to have enjoyed the trappings of academic success. He is a noted labor law scholar who is a chaired professor at his university, has been a tenured professor at Yale and Stanford law schools, and has served as general counsel and president of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Nevertheless, he writes:

I thought that universities provided an opportunity for caring relations, a sense of community, an atmosphere in which ideas were shared and refined, an egalitarian ethic, and a style of life that would permit time for family, friends, and self-expression. The reality, as I discovered, was quite different. The academic world is hierarchical and competitive; achievement is generally ephemeral and difficult to measure. Much that is done in the name of scholarship or teaching makes little contribution because it is removed from reality and the concerns of humanity. Rather than feeling an automatic sense of community, I have often felt alienated. In particular, the desire for success and status has often conflicted with other goals of meaning, community, study, and reflection (Getman, ix).

Getman confronts some very serious issues facing academe, including treatment of women and people of color, the fairness of tenure decisions, and values and judgments that go into faculty hiring. No doubt his experience in leading the AAUP has given him a broad view of academic life, including its uglier sides in terms of hiring and tenure disputes.

Somewhere between some of the injustices cited by Getman and the more idyllic views of professorial life painted in the memoirs of other scholars lies the more typical academic experience. For those who could use some plain thinking about the latter, Donald Hall's *Academic Lives* is extremely helpful. Hall, an English professor at California State University, Northridge, recognizes that the traditional, full-time, tenure-track teaching appointment is a pretty good deal. It provides a steady income, opportunities to engage in scholarship, and (at least theoretically) academic freedom. Nevertheless, he also understands that academic life has its own stress points. Tenure decisions, time pressures, issues of academic prestige and hierarchy, and personality conflicts all can wreak havoc with one's peace of mind. Hall's success is in helping us to sort out the big worries from the little ones. In essence, he tells us to manage, but not sweat, the small stuff.

The topic of alternative colleges, universities, labor schools, and adult learning centers deserves considerable attention, and I plan to address it in a companion essay. For now, suffice it to say that the continuation and development of non-traditional institutions that support learning and research are an important part of building meaningful communities.

### **Political and Social Activism**

Living a meaningful life, however, requires more than dialogue, especially when political ideals come into play. Expression must sometimes become a form of political action. Derrick Bell, a law professor at NYU and noted civil rights activist, has spent a career melding his deeds to his convictions, and much of his life philosophy is contained in his latest book, *Ethical Ambition*. Drawing examples from his own life and the stories

of others, Bell writes of the importance of pursuing passions, acting courageously, searching for faith, building healthy human relationships, finding ethical role models, and maintaining humility. He believes that “humanity at its essence is both an ongoing readiness to recognize wrongs and try to make things better, and the desire to help those in need of assistance without expecting reward or public recognition. It is a difficult task, but no other endeavor better conveys the certainty that this is what life is about; this is why we are here” (Bell, 15-16).

Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago digs into our 20<sup>th</sup> century past for a stellar role model who linked the intellect to social action. In *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy*, Elshtain shows how Jane Addams not only established Hull-House, the pioneering Chicago social service and cultural center, but also wrote widely about social policy and the peace movement. Today, Addams is neatly categorized as a “social worker,” but during her life she served in many other roles, including activist, opinion leader, and educator. In addition to her well-known *Twenty Years at Hull House*, she wrote works such as *Democracy and Social Ethics*, *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*, and *Peace and Bread in Time of War*. She was a member of the Chicago School Board, a leader of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, a prominent supporter of presidential candidates as wide-ranging as Theodore Roosevelt, Eugene Debs, Robert LaFollette, and Herbert Hoover, and a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Accounts of Addams’s life usually do not elicit the nostalgic sighs associated with the Greenwich Village intellectuals, but her story may be a more instructive one for those who want to make a difference. Addams’s politically progressive viewpoints

certainly were not in sync with those of mainstream America, and her life's story was nothing like those of America's working class and emerging middle class, and it certainly did not follow the script given to most women of her day. To draw upon the construct developed in Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, Addams managed to straddle impressively the line between the "exit" and "voice" options in a way that allowed her to create new institutions and challenge the status quo.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The title of this essay suggests where I hope to go from here with some of the ideas that emerge from these works. I use the word "building" because it is clear to me that we need a lot more community and must think in constructive terms about how to go about this. I use the term "thoughtful communities" despite my temptation to substitute "progressive" for "thoughtful" because I no longer believe that community should be defined solely by political orientation, even if that factor will likely remain of great importance to me. "Thoughtful" suggests to me that our notions of what makes for good communities must constantly be subjected to rethinking and reevaluation. I invoke the words "mind, heart, and deed" because I envision "community" as being a holistic function.

For me, the works discussed here, as well as related books and articles not covered in this essay, cry out for a more thoughtful synthesis about how their ideas contribute to community building. Thus, I would like to dig deeper into these sources to make stronger linkages and distinctions between them. In particular, I hope that I can build upon this exploration in a way that shows how higher and adult learning can enhance community building.