

*Monika Nagy joined us this fall as our Service Learning Coordinator. She arrived in Buffalo two years ago as one of the founding members of the Nickel City Co-Op, a group of people dedicated to refurbishing urban housing and living in a cooperative living environment, and subsequently aid in revitalizing the downtown Buffalo area. A native Californian and graduate of Stanford, Monika has worked her way east via graduate school at the University of Chicago and now at the University at Buffalo, and most recently this summer teaching service learning at the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth.*

Good Morning, Everyone. Happy Monday.

Community-Service implies two things: community, and service within that community. The word community has many different definitions. It comes from the Latin: "communitas" meaning fellowship, and "communis" meaning common. So - common fellowship. As the urban studies class has heard over and over, we can define community as "shared spatial units," "patterns of social interaction," "symbols of collective identity," or "commitment to political or social change through action". We could all come up with examples of community in our lives that fit into these categories, but do such descriptions really capture the essence of why community is important?

What is community beyond these definitions? It can be different for everyone. Some elements of community are more fixed or permanent than others: my best friends and family, for instance, or the people with whom I work and live. As some of you know, I live in a house with fourteen other people. Some are friends; many are acquaintances, but we all live in a house together, sharing responsibilities as well as the cost of living. We are committed to values of democracy and diversity, the ideals of making decisions together and of being individually responsible for the sake of a collective benefit.

Perhaps this is what most people imagine when they think of community—our homes, our school, our daily activities - the places where we spend the most time and the experiences and people who have shaped our identities.

But what about the other types of communities we are part of in different ways? What about our neighborhoods? Or Buffalo? Or the state of New York? Are we also members of those communities? Some of us feel like we belong in Buffalo. So, maybe a sense of belonging has something to do with community. Others of us may feel like we belong, at least sometimes, somewhere else. Like California, for example, in my case. Maybe some of us feel like American citizens, based not only on where we live but also on the founding ideals of the United States. Liberty. Equality. Justice. Democracy. Freedom of speech. Innocent until proven guilty. The list goes on. So maybe community is about sharing ideological stances as well.

And what about the global community? In what ways am I linked to a family in southern France that runs a sheep farm? Or a teacher in Japan? A sweatshop worker in Bangladesh? Or a homeless kindergartener in Washington DC? In the same ways that each of us is part of many communities here at Nichols, we are also part of the shared realities of many other individuals—not simply because we are all human beings, but because we make decisions everyday that affect the well-being of other human beings. So perhaps it's not simply a sense of belonging, or a sense of shared ideological beliefs, but it also involves some self-reflection about how our actions affect others.

There are some people for whom a sense of belonging is a very important part of being in a place, be it a city, a job, or simply walking down the street. I know that for myself, I have come to understand that there is something extremely important about this concept of belonging, beyond the simple "where I'm from." In addition, I have somehow realized that it isn't something that can be done alone. As some of you who have faced different forms of discrimination are acutely aware, the feeling of belonging cannot be wished into being, or forced, or dictated. It cannot be bought, not really, nor can it be bargained for. It seems to be rather a tacit agreement, such that a sense of belonging has something to do with mutual

human regard for one another - with mutual respect and acceptance and acknowledgement. My experience of a real sense of belonging is conditional upon my granting that same sense to another.

Herein lies the most human part of community, one that I haven't yet found in a definition. Perhaps community means that even though we may be very different from the many people around us, though we may be from a different cultural background, or religious, or racial, or class background, even though we may have very different politics, and completely different life experiences, there is still room for us to recognize one another's humanity, to know one another, and to empathize through the common seeking and granting of inclusion and human regard.

I came to understand that for myself, in order to feel like I can experience community to the fullest, in its most human sense, it means suspending my inclination to believe that I have things all figured out—that I know why the world runs as it does, and how certain individuals "succeed" while others slip through the cracks. In abandoning such a self-assured mentality, something amazing happened. Everything started shifting shapes. Stories unfolded that I had never dreamed of, and in turn, my understanding of the world, and of myself changed dramatically over time.

I started to wonder why hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people were homeless in the wealthiest country in the world. Why millions of people in this country work 40 hours a week at minimum wage, and make an annual salary well below the poverty line. Reasons like laziness make less and less sense as the physical, emotional, and psychological strains associated with poverty are better understood. For homeless people, poverty means not only exhaustion, but also being valued in society as less than human somehow. When I realized that about half the people defined as poor in this country are children, I started to imagine how successful we are in life, has as much to do with the families we're born into as it does the environment in which we grow or stagnate, are encouraged or threatened.

As these and many more new truths emerged, I was forced to look to others, as well as within myself, to make sense of a social landscape that constantly presents stereotypes, misinformation, and assumptions about different categories in society. I swore to listen more carefully, to look for the roots of problems, and to welcome people into my community regardless of our differences, until they gave me a reason to believe otherwise. Innocent until proven guilty. The different types of people I have met over the years, as a result, have shaped and reshaped, molded, exploded, and refined my many ways of seeing the world, of making sense, and of being part of things.

In some ways I started to piece together a set of standards for how I aspire to move around in society, whether in my house, at Nichols, in a neighborhood, city, state, country, or on a global scale. With people I know and love, consider acquaintances, or have never met—there are a few basic ideals that keep surfacing in the back of my mind somewhere: that I question how my thoughts, words and actions, or lack thereof, affect other human beings. And that I keep learning how to listen, listen because I believe that I will learn more about myself, and the human social realities by hearing what other people say and those who may have seen more or different sights than I. The problems of a community that I consider myself part of are my problems too. That's it for community.

Then what, though? If I imagine myself to be part of an ever shifting, ever moving community—one that includes my best friend, a haggard looking stranger, and a child across the world—then what is the next ethical step? The Dalai Lama once said, "it is not enough to be compassionate. You must act," which highlights the next set of difficult steps that involve thinking or feeling, speaking, and acting. Oftentimes, we may think something, and not know exactly how to articulate it, let alone how to act in accordance with such thoughts.

Which brings us to service. What about service? Well, by now you won't be surprised to hear that I don't have an easy definition of service either, or of why or when or how we should do it, if "should" is even the right word. What does it mean to be a good citizen? To be civically engaged? To suggest that being a good citizen is synonymous with understanding the social and political dilemmas that face a certain moment in history? What does it mean to bring life and vibrancy to words like "social consciousness", "social responsibility" "and privilege" in ways that don't induce guilt, but rather foster a space for more conversations about understanding these dynamics, rather than glossing over them?

In an ever-globalizing world economy, it is very confusing to understand how my actions, not just my thoughts and words, may affect a sweatshop worker, without worker's rights, healthcare, or fair pay halfway across the world. Similarly, sometimes it is impossible to suppose how a certain thought about a homeless man, or a choice of words—or perhaps worse, a choice of no words, can affect the daily reality of a fellow human being.

Part of my main purpose here at Nichols is to find ways of becoming more aware and engaged with humanity. One important aspect of service-learning is to address a particular need in a community. But another is foster meaningful and human contact in order to contemplate and condition a sense of empathy for the whole range of human experiences, and to understand as fully as possible the forces behind human suffering.

Now, I would be lying to you all if I said this was easy. Or that I've achieved some sort of enlightened state around these issues of community. Quite the contrary. I have outlined these ideals as my personal code of ethics, which means that every day I strive to live up to them, and oftentimes I fall short - but not always. Perhaps this is part of being human, that we keep pushing ourselves beyond what we once thought possible. That we one day find ourselves making connections, or in situations that we never dreamed of being able to understand. Perhaps this is what makes us uniquely human...our ability to stretch, to outgrow ourselves, to evolve in new and different ways in order to keep on living. To keep being human, through asking questions, looking more closely, and watching ourselves as we morph and shift at our own margins, based on what we see, and hear and learn, instead of stagnating or becoming sedimentary - or complacent.

And so I ask myself the difficult questions all the time. The same ones that I will ask you to contemplate.

How do I start to really be open to the humanities of those who are not like me?

How can I get better at trying to see where people are coming from?

How can I question my own prejudices?

What does it mean to suggest that there are racist, classist, sexist tendencies that exist within me, because I am a product of a society that still functions with these sorts of hierarchies? And how can I constantly check them, or be aware of them and imagine something else? Is there some other option?

Perhaps there are even more difficult questions.

If a group of people is systematically oppressed or silenced over centuries on the basis of class, let's say, or race, am I willing to give up something to create other checks and balances? Am I willing to redistribute a little until I'm able to really get at those roots of the problem? And help change the system?

Or how can I be open to having a compassionate conversation with someone whose politics at this particulate moment, I find to be reprehensible, or irresponsible? Because I realize that the

alternative –an impasse, a refusal to communicate, and an unwillingness to listen risks my becoming less human somehow.

Finally, how can I learn to humanize a homeless woman sleeping on the curb? How do I learn to consider her a real human being, and not just an object, or lump on the street? How can I start to see the processes that led her to her current situation? And then what on earth do I do to try to tackle such a problem at its roots?

Anthropologist Margaret Mead famously said that we should “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

This auditorium is filled with thoughtful, intelligent, future leaders. And you all have the power to affect things around you in countless ways, not just in the present, but also as your visions and hard work are crafted into future realities.

Thanks so much for listening. And have a great day.