

Reflections of ‘an old bloke’

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The years teach much which the days never knew. ~Ralph Waldo Emerson

A man's age is something impressive, it sums up his life: maturity reached slowly and against many obstacles, illnesses cured, griefs and despairs overcome, and unconscious risks taken; maturity formed through so many desires, hopes, regrets, forgotten things, loves. A man's age represents a fine cargo of experiences and memories. ~Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Wartime Writings 1939-1944, translated from French by Norah Purcell

These two quotes capture the potential that age provides us and our communities. However, too often this potential is masked by a prevailing view which would have us believe we have reached our ‘use-by date’. This can make us feel disconnected. Boredom, resentment and depression are all sentiments of disconnectedness. They present life to us as a broken connection. They give us a sense of not-belonging. In interpersonal relations, this disconnectedness is experienced as loneliness. When we are lonely we perceive ourselves as isolated individuals surrounded, perhaps, by many people, but not really part of any supporting and nurturing community. Loneliness is without doubt one of the most widespread diseases of our time. Its effects are particularly felt in retired life but unfortunately it affects family life, neighbourhood life and business life. It causes suffering not only in elderly people but also in children, teenagers and adults. Those of you who mentor at Flexi School will vouch for that. Out of all of this pervading loneliness many cry, ‘Is there anyone who really cares? Is there anyone with whom I can feel at home?’

I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know but you have the answer to such loneliness in what TOMNET offers. However, maybe you haven’t yet seen TOMNET as what I call a ‘community of practice’. It may be useful to encourage you to think about this idea.

Wenger (2007) suggests there are three elements which are crucial in distinguishing a community of practice from other groups and communities:

- (a) A community of practice is something more than a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared focus or interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to this focus, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. What is your focus? What was your interest in joining TOMNET?
- (b) In pursuing their interest, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. What are the ‘joint activities’ that help ‘build relationships’ in TOMNET?
- (c) Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. What is in place to help members address recurring problems?

A community of practice involves much more than just being together to undertake some task. Members of communities of practice are usually involved in building relationships over time and

communities develop around things that matter to people. The fact that they are organized around some common sense of purpose gives members a sense of joint enterprise and identity.

Communities of practice have been around for as long as human beings have learned together. At home, at work, at school, in our hobbies, we all belong to communities of practice, a number of them usually. In some we are core members. In many we are merely peripheral. And we travel through numerous communities over the course of our lives. In fact, communities of practice are everywhere. They are a familiar experience, so familiar perhaps that it often escapes our attention.

I would suggest that a key focus for TOMNET is about making a contribution, having an influence in the community, sharing knowledge and experience. In some communities even today the elders are considered the 'wise' and the 'respected'. In some cultures the elders still pass on values and mores through narratives and stories. Our modern-day culture seems to have left that behind but I'm confident that we can resurrect elements of the traditions of past community life, not in the way it used to be for society has changed and it won't return to those times. However, the values and mores that bind a community need to be transmitted – we need to find a way to do this and we as elders have a role to play in that. The TOMNET 'community of practice' is such a way. We should try to avoid regretting what we've lost and focus on what we've achieved. Becoming an influential community of practice captures the potential of community elders.

Seniors are great volunteers, but I think that sometimes the menial tasks that charities often ask of elders fails to capitalise on the resources that elders have to offer. As Everaldo Compton has said 'They (elders) want to get out to the coalface of life where the action is and where they can directly help people in need. They have the life experience to take part in sensitive human situations and they can save governments millions of dollars by doing so. The good part about the greying of the world is the opportunity that it opens for those of innovative spirit'.

Father Time is not always a hard parent, and, though he tarries for none of his children, often lays his hand lightly upon those who have used him well; making them old men and women inexorably enough, but leaving their hearts and spirits young and in full vigour. With such people the grey head is but the impression of the old fellow's hand in giving them his blessing, and every wrinkle but a notch in the quiet calendar of a well-spent life. ~Charles Dickens