

Excerpt from *Finding Community:* *What Works Well in Community*

What Works Well in Community?

Here's what seems to work well in community:

- Confidence, self-acceptance, self-esteem.
- Assertiveness.
- Humility, willingness to listen and learn.
- Willingness to serve, to contribute to something larger than yourself.

By "confidence" and "self-esteem," I don't mean egotism or self-importance, but the simple appreciation of one's own worth, which usually results in an innate willingness to extend respect and good will to others. People who feel fairly good about themselves tend to treat other people well, and to enjoy living in community. However, people at the lower end of the self-worth spectrum — including both those who behave as if they feel worthless and inferior, and those who behave in ways that are prideful or dismissive, or who put on superior airs — seem to have difficulty adjusting to community. Sometimes these folks have trouble with other people's feedback hitting them too hard. Sometimes these folks don't know how to take their fair sense of responsibility for things they have done. They either take too much responsibility: "Oh, I'm a terrible person!" — or too little responsibility: "I do *not* do that! *You're* the one with the problem."

Assertiveness often accompanies self-confidence, but not always. By “assertive” I sure don’t mean “aggressive,” but rather, the ability to speak up, ask questions, ask for what you want (sensitively and respectfully, of course), to patiently persist, and to take the initiative. Sometimes it simply means having enough initiative, patience, and persistence just to deal intelligently with something in the community that really needs help.

. . . A third important quality for living in community, in my opinion, is humility. I certainly don’t mean self-deprecation or groveling, but a simple willingness to assume that we may not know many things, we may not have all the answers and we may learn something new. This kind of humility is a simple kind of gentle gratitude and respect for ourselves and others. It also means not assuming we know more than other people, but can learn new things. It’s what Zen Buddhists call “beginner’s mind” — being open and willing every day to be surprised and delighted, informed and reformed.

Lastly, it helps to take genuine pleasure in working with others to create something that is much larger than our own small selves. Think of a time when you worked with friends or colleagues on a project that benefited others, or one which you could never have done alone. If you enjoyed the experience, you’ll know what I mean. I often view living in my community as a lifelong ecological art project. It’s a lot bigger than anything I could ever do by myself—it takes collaborating shoulder-to-shoulder with others. It feels great!

—From Chapter 12: “What Does It Take to Live in Community?”