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Let Your Light Shine: A Holistic Reflection on the Individual in a Community

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LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE: A HOLISTIC
REFLECTION ON THE INDIVIDUAL IN A COMMUNITY

AN ALL COLLEGE THESIS

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Distinction

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by

Nicole C. Argudin

May, 2017

**Let Your Light Shine: A Holistic
Reflection on the Individual in a Community**

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Let Your Light Shine: A Holistic Reflection on the Individual in a Community

Abstract

"Sic luceat lux vestra," or "Let your light Shine" This phrase from the Gospel of Matthew stresses the importance that we all have a light or a talent and we should shine our light for all. The problem though is when we live in the same community for so long, we start to lose our uniqueness and eventually become close-minded to new experiences. By encountering and learning from other communities, we are made aware of this issue and other strengths and weakness of our own community that we take for granted. My disclaimer about this paper is that it is not a typical scholarly paper. This paper is filled with an accumulation of my observations and encounters living in different communities: my college experience, living in the Japanese community through my study abroad program, and my experience in the martial arts community. I will draw upon these experiences as well as use other scholars to provide insights into my experiences. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that communities are formed due to the unique individuals that are a part of the community, rather, than the standards we label individuals and to achieve this, it requires an openness to everyone's differences. I will support this thesis by evaluating: the relationship between leaders and the community, suffering's role in a community, listening as a tool to recognize and overcome our differences and that an inclusive community begins with the acceptance of our unique selves.

Introduction

One of the many phrases that is popular in the Benedictine tradition I learned while studying at my University is: "*Sic luceat lux vestra*," or "Let your light Shine" which comes from the *Gospel of Matthew*: "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."¹ This verse stresses the importance that we all have a light or a talent and we should shine our light for all. Each of us has a talent that can benefit ourselves as well as the communities we are a part of. What makes communities strong is when we unite our unique skills so that all can benefit.

However, by taking the initiative to engage in communities that aren't our own allows us to discover our uniqueness again. Equally important, living in one's home community for an extended period can also lead to the tendency to forget about each other's lives. There can be the assumption that everyone experiences the same degrees of struggles, pains, joys, and even celebrations. By encountering and learning from other communities, we are made aware of this issue and other strengths and weakness of our own community that sometimes we take for granted.

With this, my disclaimer about this paper is that it is not your typical scholarly paper. This paper is filled with an accumulation of my observations and encounters living in different communities: my college experience, living in the Japanese community through my study abroad program, and my experience in the martial arts community. I will draw upon these experiences as well as use other scholars to provide insights into my experiences. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that communities are formed due to the unique individuals that are a part of the community, rather, than the standards we use to label individuals and that to achieve this, it

¹ Matthew 5:16

requires an openness to everyone's differences. I will support this thesis by evaluating the: the relationship between leaders of a community, suffering's role in a community, listening as a tool to recognize and overcome our differences and that an inclusive community begins with the acceptance of our unique selves. The first topic I will write about is the relationship between leaders of a community.

Leader Community Relationship

“The reason the sea can govern a hundred rivers is because it has mastered being lower thus it can govern a hundred rivers. Hence, if the sages would be above the people they should speak as if they were below them. If they would be in front they should act as if they were behind them. Thus when sages are above the people aren't burdened when they are in front the people aren't obstructed.”²

One of the many things I learned while in Japan is that no matter what position or status a person has, each person has a key role in a community that helps build it. With this, with any project, group, community, or nation, there is always a need for someone or a group of people to take the initiative to organize and direct things. Without them, there would be discord. What is even more important though, is the trust between leader(s) and the community and shared understanding of everyone's roles. Without this trust and understanding, there would be discord. In my perspective, it is the job of the leader to understand that the people they lead are not all the same which means that they should learn as much as they can about the people they are leading so that they know how to tailor their agenda to them. Equally important, the community must also have patience and understanding with leaders who are also trying their best to do their role

² Lao Tzu, Red Pine, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching*(Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2010). 132

by using their unique way to lead. Being a leader, at times, can be a hard and lonely position and the community must not only revere the leader, equally, they must also be the support of the leader. These are the points I will illustrate in this section.

The role of the leader is a very heavy burden. As Saint Benedict put so well, “The abbot must always remember what he is and remember what he is called, aware that more will be expected of a man to whom more has been entrusted. He must know what a difficult and demanding burden he has undertaken.”³ Benedict’s explanation of a leader, though in the context of the role of the Abbott, can be applied to any leader. A leader must take care of the people under their leadership. If they forget this, they are forgetting why they are in the position in the first place. Another quote to couple with this is from the Chinese philosopher, Confucius.

In this quote, he is having a discussion with Duke Ding and Ding asks what saying can make a state flourish? Confucius’s reply is “Being a ruler is difficult and being a minister is not easy. If this saying helps you to understand that being a ruler is difficult, does it not come close to being a single saying that can cause a state to flourish?”⁴ To expand on this, Edward Slingerland, the editor, commented that this saying is similar to passages found in the ancient *Book of Documents* (“If the sovereign can realize the difficulty of being a sovereign, and the minister realize the difficulty of being a minister, the government will be well ordered, and the common people will strive diligently after Virtue”) meaning that a responsible ruler would handle every matter, no matter how small, with care.⁵ In this quote, Confucius asserts that if leaders understand their roles then they will work to be good examples for the people they lead

³ Abbot of Monte Cassino Benedict Saint and Timothy Fry, *Rb 1980 : The Rule of St. Benedict in English*(Collegeville, Minn. :: Liturgical Press, 1982). 2:30-31

⁴ Confucius and Edward G. Slingerland, *Confucius Analects : With Selection from Traditional Commentaries*(Indianapolis, IN :: Hackett Pub. Co., 2003).145

⁵ *Ibid.* 145-146

and the people in turn will work to be as virtuous as their leaders. Both quotes, though they come from different traditions, express the heavy responsibility of being a leader, especially in Confucius's quote, where he asserts why it's important to have support when taking on this position.

So then how does the leader become a good example for the people they lead? I believe the first step is that the leader must understand themselves and their beliefs. If they don't know this then how can they guide others? The Founder of Aikido wrote "The art of peace begins with you. Work on yourself and your appointed task in the art of peace. Everyone has a spirit that can be refined, a body that can be trained in some manner, a suitable path to follow... Foster peace in your own life and then apply the Art to all that you encounter."⁶ The Founder was on to something when he said that the art of peace begins with you. In our fast-paced society, we are given fewer chances to actually sit down and think about who we are. We are forced to learn on the go and though at times this is good for development, it is also a hazard because you can only learn so much. In addition, you can also pick up bad habits that can be detrimental for the community you lead such as when under pressure of hiding yourself rather than facing the problem. No matter how many self-help books you read, you can't always learn about oneself through them: it is both through experience and constant self-evaluation.

When I was in Japan, I met a man who was a Buddhist priest (we will name him Satoru (知)). When you think of a priest, especially a Zen Buddhist one, you would assume that they always dress in robes, do not marry and have a family, and live in temples (I admit that I too was guilty of this assumption). However, Satoru was different: one, he had a family, two, he didn't

⁶ Morihei Ueshiba and John Stevens, *The Art of Peace*(Boston, Mass. : Enfield :: Shambhala ; Publishers Group UK [distributor], 2010). 3

live in a temple, and three, he owned a company. Or rather, his company was one that allowed him to apply Buddhist teachings to help businesses function better. His method was to help businesses by working from the top down. The top down method is when consultants help business owners achieve their goals by self-evaluation and better awareness of their employees. This method is important because, like the body, the leader of the company is the head that directs the body. If the head is feeling overwhelmed, disorganized, or self-centered, the body can't function properly, hence, what is needed is a mental change.

What I learned from Satoru is that self-evaluation, especially in a leadership position, is very important because if you don't check yourself occasionally you will eventually conduct yourself in ways that either the people you lead or even you won't approve of. A leader can get so caught up in giving orders that he or she will eventually forget how to order him/herself! Not to mention if you hold a very high position people would be afraid to even reject some of the things the person orders. Confucius warns about this: "People have a saying, 'I take no joy in being a ruler, except that no one dares to oppose what I say.' If what the ruler says is good, and no one opposes him, is this not good? On the other hand, if what he says is not good, and no one opposes him, does this not come close to being a single saying that can cause a state to perish?"⁷ With this, it is important to constantly check yourself to make sure you are leading people on the right path. Some effective ways to check yourself are by setting time to either talk with someone you trust or even journaling about your experiences.

The second step to being a good leader is listening: listening to yourself and the people you lead. Satoru mentioned something that touched me. He said that in order to fully become

⁷ Confucius and Slingerland, *Confucius Analects : With Selection from Traditional Commentaries*. 146

aware of oneself and of others “one must utilize all their senses and ultimately listen to their heart”. As I was writing this, I realized it was also related to a popular quote from Saint Benedict: “Listen carefully... with the ear of your heart.”⁸ Listening is challenging and listening to your heart is even more challenging because we are constantly filled with internal and external chatter Thich Nhat Hanh writes that:

“To take hold of our minds and calm our thoughts, we must also practice mindfulness of our feelings and perceptions. To take hold of our mind, you must practice mindfulness of the mind. You must know how to observe and recognize the presence of every feeling and thought... If you want to know your own mind, there is only one way: to observe and recognize everything about it. This must be done at all times, during your day-to-day life.”⁹

Taking hold of our minds is a deep statement because, let’s be honest, when are we really aware of what we are doing? We are so trained to be multitaskers that doing simple tasks like sitting and facing ourselves is unfortunately the most arduous task. Because of this and as Thich Nhat Hanh put it, we must be vigilant with monitoring our thoughts and emotion and that is the first step to practicing better awareness which then leads to better listening.

In his book Dueling with O-Sensei, Ellis Amdur described how his teacher, Terry Dobson, thought he was very insightful about Aikido, especially since he trained under the founder of Aikido at one point. At the same time, he struggled with his inner self which caused a rift between his students and colleagues. His insecurities reflected in his technique and it blinded

⁸ Benedict Saint and Fry, *Rb 1980 : The Rule of St. Benedict in English*. 15

⁹ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness : An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*(Boston :: Beacon Press, 1987). 37

him from seeing other people's pain and their experiences of practicing Aikido. It wasn't until Dobson was very sick and weak himself that he realized and I quote "I thought I knew so much about self-defense. I used to teach, old people, talking so smooth and glib...I thought I was teaching compassion, and it was arrogance of the worst kind."¹⁰ Even though it took a while for Dobson to realize and reflect on his actions, it is never too early or late to make the same realization he did. The point is making amends and working hard to correct the wrongs and oneself. For this reason, I believe that before becoming leaders people must undergo a deep reflection of why they want to become a leader, because what one brings to a community or a *dojo*, whether good or bad, can impact the people you lead. In the last part of this section I will write on the relationship between leaders and the community.

When I was doing research for this paper, I decided to take on the experience of being an *Uchideshi* or live in student at a *dojo*. I am a practitioner of the Japanese Martial Art Aikido which I will also expand on later in this paper. Nevertheless, while being a *deshi* (student) I learned a lot from great teachers who took on the heavy responsibility of carrying on the art despite many sacrifices. I consider them to be great leaders because they believe in the people who practice the art and not just in the art. One of the teachers that I met during the summer (who is also a Buddhist priest), left an amazing impact on me. I do have to admit, though, that I had a different opinion when first met him.

As I mentioned, I lived as an *uchideshi* at a *dojo* which means that we had the responsibility of cleaning the *dojo*, doing office duties, and of course conduct Aikido demonstrations which is expected of us since we literally eat and sleep Aikido. For about two

¹⁰ Ellis Amdur, *Dueling with O-Sensei : Grappling with the Myth of the Warrior Sage*([Place of publication not identified] :: FREELANCE ACADEMY PR, 2016). 37

weeks or so, we had a visiting sensei (I will name him Peter), and when I first met him I unfortunately had a bad impression of him. We were setting up mats for a demonstration and he didn't help us move the mats. The *deshis* and I had to struggle to carry all the mats out. I was a little upset because my philosophy at the time was that even when you are a person of power, if you notice that a person lower than you is struggling, it would be nice to help them. At that time, I was a little upset because I heard so many good things about him especially from one of my fellow *deshi* who was his student. As I reflect on this experience, I realized that I had an egalitarian approach to this situation. I believed that no matter the person's status, all should help each other: connecting again to the concept that we all have talents to contribute. I would question *senseis* (teachers) who would not consider the students they were teaching especially at seminars where some *senseis* came late or go over time. I felt they used their power in ways that didn't benefit all. I realize though, much to my embarrassment, that for Peter, I didn't do the one thing that I always want others to do for me: don't judge based on first encounters. I put him into the category described above but as the days progressed, and the end of his trip came to a close, I realized that Peter was carrying something even heavier than the mats I had to carry.

Peter is a *sensei* but he didn't ask to be a *sensei*. He was put into the position because the previous *dojocho* (head teacher) wanted to close the *dojo*. Peter cared for the members of the *dojo* because he knew how valuable Aikido was for the members and so he worked his hardest to keep the *dojo* open. When I talked to him he told me that his wish was to "take his last breath knowing he did something good" which is why, in order to be of service to others and for himself, he took up Zen Buddhism to compliment his Aikido practice. Taking on the role as *Sensei* was a big responsibility for Peter. He had to sacrifice lots of time, money, and his family

life for the purpose of keeping the *dojo* running. If not, many people would not have benefited from the practice of Aikido and Zen that he teaches.

One of the biggest contribution he gave to his community is working with a local after school program to form a program where he teaches children Aikido so they can stay off the streets until their parents can pick them up. In addition, Peter personally took in students he felt were dedicated to the art and trained them so that they can in return teach other children. It is an accountability deal where the student must understand the sacrifice he made for them and how much of an impact they can have on other children. This relationship is one that I feel leaders should have with the people they lead. My fellow *deshi* who was Peter's student understood this relationship which is why he had great respect for Peter but also knew that when the time comes when Peter needs help, he would do it and not just because he supports him but because of the trust they developed.

I also think what impacts this relationship, as Peter put it, is "his Zen and Aikido training made him mentally and physically raw." What he means by raw is being vulnerable. People assume that in order for a leader to take leadership they must have a front and hide their emotions: to appear without worry and fear. I disagree with this statement because those emotions that we consider a weakness are what make us human. We are not immortal and immune to the struggles of life and people sometimes want to see that from a leader or else they start looking like an emotionless being (aka a robot). I have seen it where leaders show no emotions and then that one time they show emotions people are so shocked and then criticize them. Then on another spectrum, if a person shows too much emotion they are criticized. Therefore, it is our responsibility as people under leaders to be understanding with those who lead us. Leaders are like us: they eat, sleep, cry, get excited, etc. They just are placed in a higher

position and have to take on so much more responsibility and, at times, can make you emotional. We must remember that leaders are doing their best to keep everything running and they are using their unique skills to do that and again, we should be open to that because after all, we are all part of the journey of life. We go through struggles and elations and no matter who the person is, we all need to support each other on this journey.

Suffering

Suffering is inevitable. We experience physical, mental, and spiritual suffering. This suffering can affect not only the person experiencing it, but, in addition, the people around them. When it comes to suffering within a community, it is an even greater sorrow because it can shake even the foundation that keeps it together. In Buddhism, there is the term *dukkha* which basically translates to suffering or feeling unsatisfied with life. In Early Buddhist Discourse, the Buddha describes suffering. “Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering, grief, lamentation, pain, despair, and distress are suffering: not getting what one wants, that is suffering.”¹¹ Anything and any experience can be suffering but what relieves suffering is first being aware of it and second creating a positive environment that can help you overcome the suffering you are going through at that moment. As John Holder commented, “By developing mindfulness, a person first observes the various aspects of one’s being, then learns to control the mind and its reactions to external and internal stimuli.”¹² This is easier said than done, especially when you are going through the suffering. However, what I have learned is that suffering first starts internally with the person’s physical, spiritual, and mental health. Then it affects the people around you and can cause, at times, discord if there is a misunderstanding of this suffering. The

¹¹ John J. Holder, *Early Buddhist Discourses*(Indianapolis, IN :: Hackett Publishing, 2006). 51

¹² Ibid. 42

message of this section though, is that suffering shouldn't be fought alone and that what does help alleviate suffering is when we work towards helping the person through it.

It is hard to deal with suffering alone because without support and a resilient mentality, you can easily fall into depression. It is like you are stuck in a very dark pit and you are trying to get out but the walls are too slippery to allow you to get out. Not only that, the dirt from the traffic above just keeps piling on top of you. However, that rope that helps you get out of the pit is the support system you receive whether from family, friends, a support group, etc. Let me expand on this from personal experience.

“Life is like snow. Snow forms in the clouds and then as it falls to the ground it collects dust and smog from the air. Once it reaches the ground it piles up with other snow until spring and warm weather comes to melt it. The snow melts into water and it is given a new chance to be used to create new life: water for crops or even forming new snowflakes.” I wrote this in my journal for a class where we were required to journal about our different meditative experiences. I also wrote this after I was recovering from a deep depression. My first year of college, though it was exciting, it was also the precursor to the darkest time in my life.

During my Sophomore year, I battled with depression. It is a hard thing to fight. You have those days where you really don't want to do anything and all you want to do is sleep. You want to escape the pressures from the outside world and have uncontrollable crying or you hold it till you are by yourself so others don't think you are weak. You want people to see the pain you are going through and want to talk to someone about your pain, but at times it just comes out as complaining. Inside you are crying for help but eventually you just put on your usually happy go lucky face while deep inside you are drowning in deep waters where there is everlasting

silence. I started to have suicidal thoughts, I lost my roommate who was also my best friend, and I was ready to transfer from my college. Things were just not as glamorous as everyone made college to be! My snow became dirty!

After all this, I realized I needed help and eventually I admitted myself to counseling. As I mentioned in the intro to this section, this process is very hard to handle alone. No one should go through it alone which is why it's important that there is a support system or community. Writing this story is me expressing my "raw" self because not many people knew this about me (including my own mother who didn't figure out till a year later). I write it, though, in the hope for people to understand that how you conduct yourself everyday can affect people in your community. You never know if a person is struggling but maybe a simple thing like a smile can briefly ease the pain they are feeling. There is a quote by the founder of Aikido that I use in my email messages: "When your eyes engage those of another person, greet him or her with a smile and they will smile back. This is one of the essential techniques of the Art of Peace."¹³ I love this quote because it embodies my philosophy that no matter who the person is whether they are a stranger or a friend I try my best to make a positive impact on them and to provide them with good energy. I think it is important to form a community that works together to alleviate each other's pains because that is what I needed when I was going through my depression.

I can't say I have fully recovered from the depression. There are those days when I have to fight to not fall into the whole of despair. It is a constant battle I fight but I am thankful that I have chosen a community that helps me stay out of it like the sisters of my college, my professors who though they have very busy lives and their own '*dukkhas*', they take the time to

¹³ Ueshiba and Stevens, *The Art of Peace*. 97

listen and help students who struggle. These people saw me for who I am: a person suffering and not the student with depression. Sometimes we focus on labeling the problem rather than working on the solving the problem and this is when we forget that our God given talents are used to solve problems not making it worse. I would say at this point, my snow has reached the ground and thanks to the other snow around me, we made it to spring and are renewed and ready to face the world once more. With this intention, I want to end this section with a story of an experience I had while writing this paper that shows the power of community in the midst of suffering.

My college is set in the small town of St. Joseph, MN where not many things happen besides parties sponsored by college students and family events like the fourth of July. However, 27 years ago an event happened that shook not only St. Joseph but the whole state of Minnesota, and even some parts of the world. 27 years ago, a child named Jacob Wetterling was abducted a few blocks from his home. His sibling and friend were able to escape the abduction but Jacob, unfortunately was taken and many people searched for days, weeks, months, and eventually years but Jacob was not found. People left porch lights on in hope that he would come on their footsteps, hung ribbons in honor of him every year around the time of his abduction, and gave prayers for the family. It wasn't until this past year that the man who took Jacob, after a deal, lead the Wetterling family and law enforcement to where Jacob's body was buried. It was a great tragedy for the family and the community that for years had stood by the family in hopes that Jacob would return. Though this was a tragic ending for the search for Jacob, all was not lost. Because of this incident, the family, amid their search, formed a foundation that helps other families find their lost children. In addition, because of this incident, people became more aware

of child abduction which prompted new legislation in Minnesota to help prevent and aid court proceedings if a child is abducted.

Before all of this, I didn't even know about the abduction of Jacob Wetterling. I heard about it especially around the date of his abduction but I didn't realize how much of an impact it had on the St. Joseph community till the memorial that the family had to finally bring closure. The College of Saint Benedict Women's Choir, the choir I am apart of had the opportunity to sing at the beginning for the family and it wasn't till we got on stage that I realized how big the community for Jacob was. People traveled from across the world to support the family, my school provided the space for the memorial, singers and choirs came to sing, and many spoke at the memorial (including Jacob's family), all in hopes of helping the Wetterling family and the community during the healing process. Because of this, I learned even more how important a community is when suffering is involved. When we unite, hope lives and that we are all called to serve and to be served. By doing this we can move on together to help others just as the Wetterlings did in honor of Jacob.

Listening

When I studied abroad in Japan, I felt very much at home. Granted, I did have those moments where I felt a little uncomfortable and felt like "the other" because being an African American in a country that is predominantly Japanese, well... you really do stick out. I especially experienced this when as part of my abroad program, I interned at a preschool and one child asked, "Why is your skin dark?" as the child proceeded to pinch my skin. I had to chuckle instead of getting mad at the child because the child was not used to seeing foreigners especially black foreigners. However, this is the beauty of studying abroad. There is the exchange that students get to see a different culture, and the people in the country also

benefit from meeting new cultures in their country without spending the thousands of dollars to travel.

The biggest advice I tell people who are going to study abroad is to be open to take the unbeaten road and don't be a foreigner. What do I mean by foreigner? Gaijin is a Japanese word meaning foreigner but it can also be used as a derogatory term for anyone non-Japanese. I am not using this as a bad term especially because it is still being used in this context. However, what I would describe as a Gaijin today is a bad foreigner who doesn't respect the Japanese culture. There are people who enter Japan and hear about the different things in Japan like anime/manga, the many interesting restaurants, Kimono, Samurai, etc. However, they disregard the people. They don't care to respect the rules of Japan and are ethnocentric. Therefore, in places like Okinawa where American military bases reside, foreigners are disliked. This is evident in an article by Scott Zhuge describing the issue with military bases in Okinawa. "The ongoing presence of the US military bases has created reports of excessive noise, environmental pollution, and crime, prompting local opposition."¹⁴ Due to the military bases in Okinawa, some of the military personnel and their guests have caused fights, disrupted the daily life of locals, and even worse, have killed innocent locals.

The reason I point these out is not to point fingers at foreigners entering Japan or the people of Japan; rather, I want to show that for both sides to have a better understanding of each other, both must be open to listening to each other. What I mean by listening is as Joan Chittister puts well: "We must learn in this century again to open our minds and open our hearts and open our lives and open our talents and open our hands to others."¹⁵ What I mean by listening is that

¹⁴ Scott Zhuge, "Okinawa Occupied," *Harvard International Review* 34, no. 3 (2013).

¹⁵ Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily : Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, 1st HarperCollins pbk. ed. ed.(San Francisco :: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991). 126

we have to be hospitable physically and mentally to new encounters. We must be willing and open to understand why a culture conducts certain rituals. Foreigners must be understanding to why the locals do things. You don't have to accept it but respect it or else the people won't accept you and will treat you as "the other." As for locals, be patient with the foreigners and if it looks like they want to understand the culture, be willing to explain it to them because there are those who don't want to be in the dark about it. They want to learn the culture but just don't fully understand it unless it is explained to them.

When I was in Japan I had lots of instances where I experienced good listening with the intention of hospitality, at the same time, I did experience bad listening too. One good listening experience was when I post-traveled after my study abroad to Akita Japan. I went there to do Aikido training and to learn more about the Japanese life. What I gained though, was not only knowledge on Aikido and Japanese culture, in addition, I gained a family. I tell a lot of people that I love the countryside of Japan more than the urban life because I felt more at home with the people in countryside. You would think that people in the city with more chances to encounter foreigners would be more hospitable (and some were) but I felt that the people who really accepted me were the people I met in the country. Staying in Akita, I felt I could be myself a little more. I could share more of who I was and though I was an 'foreign' individual in the small town of Akita, I felt like I was also part of the small community.

This scenario I described above is rare in Japanese culture especially since they stress the importance of separating your inner family life from the outside world. As Ikeno put it, "the Japanese have long stressed the need for harmonious relationships with in the same group (uchi)

but are often not good at associating with those from other groups (soto).”¹⁶ At the university I studied at while abroad, I had experienced the soto description a lot. As a foreign exchange student, I always stayed together with my fellow exchange students and we had separate classes which is understandable because most of the classes are in Japanese. The only times we interacted with Japanese students were at some events held by the university like a retreat we did where we were forced to dorm with international and Japanese students. Or we had the option to participate in the language corner where we taught the students English and we practiced our Japanese. This only worked for a few people though and most of time they would talk to their own friends. Unfortunately, most of the time the men (in particular the American men) benefited most because the Japanese girls had a crush on them.

After a while, I realized that I had to take the initiative to find a community that did accept me which unfortunately can happen in any community. I also must stress that not all communities in Japan act this way as I iterated with my experience in Akita. However, I do hope that in the future communities, whether the Japanese, American, or any form of community, will make an effort to practice good listening with the intention of being hospitable to people entering their communities and at the same time, people entering the community must be respectful to the people in the community. What is important is that hospitality shouldn't just be practiced for select people but for all people. The last crucial point I want to make about listening is that you have to be a sincere listener as is illustrated in the following example from my time in Japan.

It was Halloween weekend and though I was having a lovely time in Japan, it was also very difficult and tiring. As I mentioned before, how much I loved living in the city of Tokyo,

¹⁶ Roger J. Davies, Osamu Ikeno, and 修池野, *The Japanese Mind : Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*(Boston :: Tuttle Pub., 2002). 219

because of its convenience and diversity of people and cultures, I began to have the urge to go back into the countryside. In the countryside, in my opinion, it feels less crowded, quieter, and provides a more welcoming environment. So, I decided to go on a pilgrimage to a town called Ise which is the pilgrimage site for the main Shinto shrine of Japan: the holy site of Shinto. I went with only a small Japanese vocabulary and little knowledge of the Japanese train system but I was determined because it was my dream to visit the site before I left Japan. The day I left was very busy because it was Halloween. A note on Halloween in Japan, it is a very busy day because everyone (mostly the youth though) gather to hip places like Shinjuku ward or Shibuya ward in Tokyo and dress up in very lavish costumes and watch parades. They are however, more controlled than in the U.S. where people barely do public indecency and if they do they are quickly reprimanded by the police and the people comply without issues. Because of the Halloween festivities, unfortunately the bus I needed for me to get to my train never came. Hence, I missed my train and by the time I made it to Ise, I lost lots of sightseeing time. Yet all was not lost because I made it to my hotel and had a profound experience.

The hotel I stayed in was an old home converted to a guesthouse and in order to save money, I decided to stay in a dormitory style room. As I was unpacking, I met a woman who stayed in the same room as me and we quickly befriended each other. She was a Japanese English teacher who taught in Osaka which was not too far from Ise. After talking for about an hour, she then asked me if I would like to go to dinner with her and I thought why not. We talked more and ate lots of delicious food. When it was time to pay, she said she would pay for it as thanks for me taking the time to talk to her and to listen to her life story. A day later she left, and on my bed, she left a note of thanks and some gifts that she thought I would need. To be honest, I felt guilty because she paid for my dinner and gave me gifts and all I did was have a

conversation and dinner with her. As I reflected on the experience though, I realized that sometimes showing sincerity and taking the time to sit and listen to another person's story and to learn about their culture is a great gift to give anyone especially in this age where we are told to keep things short because time waits for no one. This can be true for somethings but at the same time we eventually forget what it truly means to socialize and to form friendships.

It would be ideal to have this type of situation all the time where two or more people sit in harmony with each other, especially when they have never met each other before. However, not all relations are rainbows and candy. It is inevitable that in relationships, and even non-relationships, conflicts can occur, causing listening and mutuality to become obsolete. One of the problems when it comes to conflicts is that sometimes no one is willing to hear the other's side of their stories or there is misunderstanding and no one is willing to take the time to step back and evaluate the situation. Like I mentioned before, with misunderstanding comes an opportunity for understanding and this happens when we know there is a misunderstanding and carefully work to gain more understanding. Let me use another example from my experience as a *deshi*.

As I mentioned in the previous section, while researching for this paper I was an *uchideshi* at an Aikido *dojo*. An *uchideshi* is a person who lives in a martial arts *dojo*. You train, clean, eat, sleep, and repeat. Being an *uchideshi* can be rewarding and hard at the same time. You soon form bonds with the people you do this cycle with. When Aikido was first developed in Japan, the *uchideshi* mostly consisted of Japanese *deshi* (student). However, this changed especially after WWII when more people from other countries started to learn the art. The teachers of the art then started traveling to other countries to spread the art across the world. The son of the founder, Kisshomaru Ueshiba, wrote in the founder's biography that "O'Sensei would say, in those early days of Aikido's expansion abroad, that it [Aikido] was "the bridge

connecting the human world to peace. I would like people to understand that the philosophical heart of Japanese *Budo* is both Aiki (unifying the energies of ki [spiritual energy]) and Ai ki (the ki energy of love and compassion).”¹⁷ In addition to that, “Aikido’s role is to link the world together through harmony and love... Through a true *Budo*, such as Takemusu Aiki, we must create harmony for all of humanity, and envelop all creation in universal love.”¹⁸ O’Sensei wanted Aikido to form a one world community and by expressing this wish to his students, they too worked to carry out his dream and it is still continuing today.

Now in the present, I had the wonderful opportunity to be an *uchideshi* and experience the *deshi* community life. The *deshis* I lived with were from diverse backgrounds. From European, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and those with mixed heritages. We also varied in social status and religion. As the founder wished for a one world community, here was an example of his dream manifested. However, like most communities, we experienced some conflict due to our diverse backgrounds and beliefs. There were those who wanted to lead and those who didn’t. Some who worked hard and some who didn’t. This caused lots of arguments and eventually people separating into groups.

I find it quite interesting that no matter how old we get we still forget that we have ears which are used for listening. What I mean by bad listening is that we hear but we don’t reflect on what is being heard. Though we talked to each other, as *deshi*, we never truly sat down and listened to each other’s opinions and learned our individual strengths and weaknesses. There were those who freely expressed their opinions and there were those who wanted to talk but weren’t given the opportunity to feel secure in expressing their thoughts. Then there was another

¹⁷ Kisshōmaru Ueshiba, *A Life in Aikido : The Biography of Founder Morihei Ueshiba*, First US edition. ed.(New York, NY :: Kodansha USA, 2015). 297

¹⁸ Ibid. 309

spectrum where the space was given to express one's ideas but they were ignored. One idea that could have been implemented was a brave space (which used to be called safe space but it was changed because people realized it deterred people away). A brave space is a way for people to be open to express their ideas in a moderated manner and allow those voices that are usually silent to have a voice. If we had set up this environment, there would probably have been a little more understanding among each other. Not only that, by understanding our concerns and weaknesses, it allows us to better understand how we can work around them. Although this would be an ideal way to settle group conflicts, it is not always an effective method due to diversity of thought which I will expand upon in this last section.

Inclusive Exclusive: The Words of Today

Suzuki, another Zen Buddhist priest, wrote that:

“More important than any stage which you will attain is your sincerity, your right effort. Right effort must be based on a true understanding of our traditional practice. When you understand this point you will understand how important it is to keep your posture right. When you do not understand this point, the posture and the way of breathing are just a means to attain enlightenment. If this is your attitude, it would be much better to take some drugs instead of sitting in the cross-legged position! If our practice is only a means to attain enlightenment, there is actually no way to attain it! We lose the meaning of the way to the goal. But when we believe in our way firmly, we have already attained enlightenment.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Shunryū Suzuki et al., *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shambhala Library; Shambhala Library. (Boston :: Shambhala, 2006). 119

Though this quote mostly tailors to those wanting to attain enlightenment through sitting in meditation I found this also relate to everyday endeavors. There is the Zen Buddhist term, *shoshin* which means beginners mind. Basically, it means that our minds should always be ready for any new encounters in life. And once we reach that encounter we must also let it go because it can prevent us from moving forward in life. One achievement shouldn't dictate our life but should only be a step to continued achievements. Furthermore, those achievements shouldn't just benefit one person but should be shared with others. The point then for this last section is that in order for a community to come together it first begins with you and then collectively each individual works towards benefitting each other.

We already know that everyone doesn't always share the same opinions on certain topics, nor are we able to read each other's minds (unless there is such thing as an empath that I am not aware of). However, what makes humans so amazing are our ability to think for ourselves and the free will to do what we feel is best for ourselves. This can be useful at times like your ability to choose a career. However, when it comes to using this free will to control others with bad intentions it can be our downfall because it makes us closed minded about each other's unique lives. Once we start thinking that our ideas are the best and that other people's opinions that could be enlightening for us are wrong, this leads to conflicts because we are disregarding the individual rather than accepting them as who they are.

What makes this situation worse is when we don't open our eyes to the injustice we are doing and instead think that everything is fine until the situation becomes dire and realize the suffering we may have caused. Then there are some who reach this point but continue to do this injustice and think there is no problem. Taking this on a bigger scale, when multiple people shares this scenario, it leads to formation of groups who work against each other. Everyone starts

feeling like a victim of some sort of injustice and eventually right and wrong becomes murky. The result of all of this are exclusive groups where people share the same injustices or lack thereof. Granted, sometimes we need exclusion whether for safety, preserving things like cultural traditions, etc. However, what makes exclusion bad is when people use it with the intention of hurting someone else. Exclusivity has come to the point where people are abused, targeted, called insulting names, and even killed. My personal experience with exclusion has unfortunately sprung from my college experience which I will expand on next.

The college I attend is rooted in the Christian Benedictine tradition and this Christian tradition is known for its sense of community and hospitality. As Written by Saint Benedict in his rules “All guest who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ”²⁰ and “All things should be the common possession of all.”²¹ The basis is that all should be welcomed in a community as if they are Christ in which we show them the utmost hospitality. Though this is the basis for my college and I love my college dearly, there have been times where students including myself, no matter what is their background, didn’t feel welcomed. I have seen instances where students talk about wanting to form a more inclusive campus where students can foster bonds and feel welcomed. This is fine, it is totally okay when we need to point out injustices that happens in our community. Be that as it may, in my school, we have the issue of diversity and understanding of how one should treat another of a different race, class and even personality. The school has worked hard to welcome people of diverse backgrounds but it has also caused groups to clash. Those who are affected go to forums to share their story of racism and segregation and they attend lectures about the issue. The problem, though, is that some of

²⁰ Benedict Saint and Fry, *Rb 1980 : The Rule of St. Benedict in English*. 73

²¹ *Ibid.* 56

those who commit the act don't attend these events and so they don't know what the problem is and they are not willing to know because they themselves have not experienced it or they don't care.

I remember at the end of my first year this situation became so bad that we had a forum to discuss this issue and it lasted late into the night. We listened to each other's stories, but what good did it do? Only a small number of people who were willing to change came, but the rest didn't bother. Though administration tries their best to help the situation, again, it depends on the person committing the act. The next question then is what can we do to bring this into awareness? Of course, one answer would be to teach children at an early age about listening but that again depends on the parents and the people who surround the child like relatives, teachers, etc. I also think about in college we are taught so many things and are told to apply what we learn outside of the college zone but the problem is most students don't know how to apply what we learn into the real world. The students then face people who don't care or can't afford to care about certain issues because their focus is to make enough money to live. As Confucius put it: "No matter how many odes he might have memorized, what good are they to him."²² Then what is the point because the cycle is endless to the point where you become the people who don't or can't afford to care.

Then there is another layer to this problem. There are those who advocate for a more inclusive community of others but turn around and practice exclusion themselves. I remember another incident that occurred on my campus while I was writing this paper where after the election there was a lot of tension on campus. People left and right were making very hurtful

²² Confucius and Slingerland, *Confucius Analects : With Selection from Traditional Commentaries*. 141

comments about each other's views and the icing on the cake was when drunk students on a bus started chanting "build that wall" which offended lots of students. The video of the incident went on Facebook and caused even more turmoil. The problem though, was that some people spoke out on how it shouldn't have been posted on Facebook especially since perspective students can see that. Not to mention, we could have lost lots of donors, which is valid reasoning because lots of students, including myself, rely on these donations. Nevertheless, these students who spoke out on this were criticized and attacked whether through the school newspaper or through private messaging just because they were giving a different perspective of the situation. And yes, I agree that issues like these need to be pointed out to be corrected but the response to those people with different views was not in my opinion, the right approach to the situation.

Basically, what I am trying to point out is that how can you preach but don't practice what you preach? How can a person advocate acceptance of others but then turn around and tell people who don't follow their cause horrible names and put them in bad categories? Or they only include people who support their causes like going to events about inclusion or protests but, those who are in their same shoes and are also in need of acceptance in a community but don't advocate are excluded because they don't join in the cause. They are left out and even put in the corner of those who practice exclusion. How is that inclusion?

Ultimately, what I think is the problem with both sides is that both focus on the labels placed on individuals or even themselves. For instance, I am African American, I am Hispanic, I am from this location, etc. Rather, we should focus on the individual and their personality. For example, I attended a choir get together hosted by a radio station. My choir was one of the featured choirs at this get together. I must also make a note that for a while I was the only African American in my choir till my last year where we had one more enter. However, I try to

focus on the music rather than how many races are featured in the choir. Anyways, I went up to a booth to ask what I needed to do and where to go. The woman at the booth, though she was very friendly, after our greeting went straight to the subject that she was glad more African American people was participating in the event. In my head, I thought okay and was going to let it pass until she asked ‘the’ question: where was I from? My response of course was my hometown of Chicago but she then pressed on saying, “where was I ‘really’ from?” I then had to explain to her that my parents are from Haiti and Cuba, and that my accent was from the many languages I learned and of course being with my French speaking family.

I have had to answer these questions multiple times throughout my four years in college and before going to college I never really thought about them. I have answered this question so many times that I have embodied this scripted response. I wish that not only the women in the story but other people would recognize me not by my label of being an African American with a Haitian/Cuban background but a person who loves music, loves telling jokes, etc. This I think is what we are forgetting when we try to foster inclusion in a community. We see the shell but don’t see the soul housed in the shell. With this intention, when forming an inclusive community, we have to temporarily strip our identities and show our raw true selves rather than hiding behind our identities.

My last point that is coupled with this is that in the fight for inclusion everyone is fighting to be recognized. It is human nature to want to be loved or recognized and if we aren’t we feel alienated and alone. We fear losing our self-worth. We always want to be in control when, in reality, there is no such thing as true control. In the TaoteChing, it is written that “When people no longer fear authority a greater authority will appear. Don’t restrict where people dwell. Don’t repress how people live. If they aren’t repressed they won’t protest. Sages therefore know

themselves but don't reveal themselves. They love themselves but don't exalt themselves, thus they pick this over that."²³ The translator, Pine expands on this by saying "Authority refers to a power outside us. Sages aren't concerned with acquiring or exercising such a power. The power of sages arises naturally from the cultivation of themselves."²⁴ In other words, one shouldn't seek power and control in order to be recognized because the more power and control we want the more conflicts we face. As Newbiggin put it, "It is certainly true that any community which claims to possess absolute truth must inevitably, if it gains power, become oppressive."²⁵ Hence, instead of a community working towards gaining power to be recognized, in my opinion, the people should seek towards working together to bring each other up. This begins, again just like in the section on leadership, when we evaluate ourselves and figure out who we are. Similarly, we must recognize that just like we want to be identified by our unique personality so do others too want to be treated the same way. "Do to others as you would have them do to you."²⁶

For this reason, I urge that if you want to practice inclusion, for both sides, you should be open to all walks of life, even your enemies. You don't have to have unconditional love for them (though that would be a good thing). Rather, you just have to be understanding of them, see in their eyes and accept them for who they are. Or as Christopher Pramuk put it: "The least (and greatest) common denominator in every kind of love is the feeling of an open circle...all are welcome here. You are welcome, just as you are."²⁷

²³ Tzu, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching*. 144

²⁴ Ibid. 145

²⁵ Lesslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*(Grand Rapids, Mich. : Geneva [SZ] :: W.B. Eerdmans ; WCC Publications, 1989).

²⁶ Luke 6:31

²⁷ Christopher Pramuk, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful : Graced Encounters across the Color Line*(Collegeville, Minnesota :: Liturgical Press, 2013). 154

Conclusion: A *Furusato* Community

“The future of humankind isn't exclusively in the hands of politicians, of great leaders, of big companies. Yes, they do hold an enormous responsibility. But the future is, most of all, in the hands of those people who recognize the other as a "you" and themselves as part of an "us." We all need each other.”²⁸

This quote came from Pope Francis's TED Talk which really summed up this research paper in seventeen minutes. This quote however, has great significance especially in the present age. As he said the future first begins with you and then it becomes us. It is up to us to create a community that we feel comfortable in. The word I think that sums this up is the word *furusato* which means hometown or native home in Japanese. This term is used to describe the place where a person was born or grew up. For me, I have never really had a *furusato* or hometown per se. My family moved a lot so I think the closest I have to a *furusato* is my family because whenever I go back home from college or a trip I always go back to my family, especially my immediate family. We have never stayed in the same town for a long period of time like most people whose family have stayed in the same town for generations. This was especially true when in the Spring of 2015 my family became homeless when our condominium burned down when a fire broke out in another unit. It wasn't until a year or so later that we finally moved into a place we can finally call home which we hope and pray that we can stay in this home and town for a very, very long time.

I write this final story because even though I never have had a town that I lived in for most of my life, I can say that I still had a *furusato* but in a different context. The many communities that I have lived in, worked in, went to school in are all considered my *furusato*.

²⁸ Pope Francis, "Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone," in *TED Talks*(April 2017).

They are the places that made me feel at home and that the people welcomed me like a family. Every time I experienced this and must leave from a place very dear to me, I say that I leave a piece of my heart and soul in that place because everywhere I go I hope to always leave a good impact on that community. Similarly, the community has also touched me and I carrying what I have learned from that community with the hopes of spreading that community's light to other communities. This *furusato* concept I think should be incorporated in all communities. When welcoming people into a community or even people already in the community, welcome them like they are relatives that have left but need a place to settle back to from their long journey. It is a place of stability that if you lose your balance in the tight rope of life, they are there to support you when you fall or need guidance. The person entering the community shines their inner flame and shares it in hopes to feed the flames of the community and in turn the community does the same for the person entering the community.

As I mentioned earlier in the paper, At the end of my study abroad trip in the Japan, I went to Aikita, Japan for post travel. My purpose was to do Aikido training where my *dojocho* (head teacher) trained and to experience Aikido in its home country. However, what I gained from this experience was not only new insights into Aikido, but a family away from my own family far away. The family I stayed with treated me like their own and gave me insight into living an authentic Japanese family life. This is one example of my *furusato*. Another *furusato* I have is my Aikido Families. I train in two styles of Aikido because I have a *dojo* at school and one for when I go back home. Nevertheless, both have welcomed me warmly. Another experience was when I went to an Aikido seminar in California and there I was treated like family too despite being a total stranger. They made sure I was okay and helped me get to the locations I needed. Lastly, at my school, on campus we have a Benedictine sister monastery on

campus and they are the most hospitable people I know. The sisters have always been my saving grace while in college and they also helped me during my depression (without them even knowing it). They follow Saint Benedict's rule "to offer warmth, acceptance, and joy in welcoming others and all guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ."²⁹ They follow it not because it is a rule, but because they truly accept and embody it themselves. All in all, these communities are my *furusatos*, the places I consider home and feel I can be myself in when I go there because they accept me for who I am.

To conclude, the premise of this essay was to demonstrate that communities are formed due to the unique individuals that are a part of the community, rather, than the standards we label individuals and to achieve this, it requires an openness to everyone's differences. First, I highlighted the relationship between leaders of a community and how it is the responsibility of the leader to self-evaluate themselves before taking on a leadership role. By doing this, they will have a better understanding of how to lead others. Correspondingly, the leader must understand that the people they lead are unique individuals that require more understanding and wisdom to lead them. Similarly, the community must understand that the leader is trying their best to lead the community the best they can using their own unique skills.

The second section emphasized the need of community support when overcoming suffering and that the only way to fix the suffering is first the individual recognizing it and then finding the help and community needed to overcome it. The third section was about the importance of listening in a community and that listening is when we are hospitable to new ideas and recognizing our differences. When this happens, we can learn new ideas that can help the individual and community become stronger. In the last section, I stressed upon the importance of

²⁹Benedict Saint and Fry, *Rb 1980 : The Rule of St. Benedict in English*. 73

accepting all walks of life in a community. A community must accept that not everyone shares the same views and life styles but what helps foster inclusion is when we stop trying to control ourselves and others and instead start accepting people, once again, for who they are: unique individuals.

My hope is that through this evaluation of an individual in a community, more people can appreciate being in a community because they are very precious. In our world where we are trying to be more and more connected, we are also starting to become fragmented because we forget how diverse communities are. Yes, connecting communities brings about more opportunities to learn new things about our big world but once we forget about the vast amount of unique people in a community, we lose that sense of connection. We should appreciate our own small communities because in these small communities' they create individuals who can, in the future, lead our world to a better future. I will then end with a quote from the founder of Aikido:

Rely on Peace
To activate your
Manifold powers;
Pacify your environment
And create a beautiful world.³⁰

³⁰ Ueshiba and Stevens, *The Art of Peace*. 176

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