

“Community as a Classroom”
Scholarship Essay Competition
Winning Entry by Sally A. Black

The most valuable lesson I have learned through my involvement in community is that there is no “us and them.” I had created this illusion with many: the poor and rich, the uneducated and educated, even my neighbor with a different religion. My work in community has taught me to notice my commonalities with others. We are all a part of the whole. With this discovery, I began to connect with people realizing this great fact all over the world.

I first discovered it while eating at my local soup kitchen. I met retired college professors, single women with children, men with disabilities, and people of all ages without jobs -- all with personal stories of strength and wisdom, just like mine. Louise welcomed me warmly that first day I ate at the community kitchen. We were joined by an elderly white-haired man named Frank. Frank has a master’s degree in education. He initially started coming to the soup kitchen at the end of each month because his social security check did not last. Now, he comes regularly for the company. I lingered after my meal, reveling in the fact that no one was rushing to leave. I had never realized my constant busyness until I spent time in another North American country.

In Mexico, I worked as an intern at *Casa de los Angeles*, a non-profit daycare / community center. It became clear immediately, I was not there to save, but to learn from and assist the Mexican families in their efforts. The center provided all family members with meaningful opportunities for becoming involved in the daily operation. Families were treated as the resources they are. Their transformations were profound, as were mine. Together, we became a part of the daily life tapestry of community learning from one another. An open-mind and genuine curiosity taught me that there is no “us and them” anywhere in the world.

After selling a house too large for a small family of three, we fulfilled our dreams of travel. While in Malaysia, we attended a Hindu festival called Thaipusam. We joined hundreds of thousand of pilgrims as our guide Raj accompanied us to Batu caves. Two hundred and seventy-two stairs led upward into the heart of the cave. As we entered, Raj

shared with us his personal beliefs about “One god, many beliefs.” When we asked him why Hindus do certain things, he only responded by saying, “Why? Well, that is their belief. Why does anyone practice their beliefs? Our differences should not separate us; we should look for what we have in common. We are all connected.” People of the world community are embracing this concept and eliminating the creation of an “us and them.”

As we have disconnected from one another and from nature, our world is showing signs of distress: destruction of the environment, an alarmingly widening gap between the rich and poor, increased addiction and materialism, a not-enough attitude no matter how much we have, and a stressful lifestyle. A shocking 51 of our 191 countries are in the midst of violent conflicts, including the United States again. But there is also plenty of hope; hope for a new day, a day of peace and justice for all. I encountered this hopeful attitude while in India. As I meandered about a dusty street in Agra after viewing the Taj Mahal, a man carrying his Quran exited a shop to speak to me. He questioned, “Which country are you from, Ma’am?”

I ventured (not quite sure how I would be received in the light of the present war against Iraq), “USA.”

“Oh.” He looked me in the eye. “Great country.”

“India is a great country too,” I replied.

“Oh yes,” he said, picking up his stride. He stopped a few feet ahead of me, turned back and said, “Great world.” He smiled warmly and continued walking down the narrow street.

“Yes.” I raised my voice as he walked away. “Great world.”

I will most likely never see this man again, but I will never forget our brief encounter as we recognized the greatness of our shared world. Our great world is in the midst of tremendous change as people are realizing we are all internationally interconnected. There is no “us and them” -- we are all interrelated. We are all world citizens!