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Dear Colleague:

What is the perfect community? One of the recognized geniuses of our century, Alfred North Whitehead (co-author with Bertrand Russell of Principia Mathematica) has this to say, and it will surprise you. However, you shouldn't be surprised, for it behooves genius to come up with an unusual perspective. Before I present his idea I should first remind you that Whitehead's philosophy has been characterized as organicism: in this philosophy an "organism" has a far broader (that is, far more generalized) meaning than that used by biologists.

Whitehead first defines pure instinct as the response of an organism to the pure causal efficacy of its external world, without any functioning of presentational mediacy, and so without any symbolism. He then goes on to say,

The most successful examples of community life exist when pure instinct reigns supreme. These examples occur only in the inorganic world, among societies of active molecules forming rocks, planets, solar systems, star clusters. (See Victor Lowe, Alfred North Whitehead, vol. 2, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

As Whitehead understands community, the physical geographers in Science Hall study the most successful examples, followed by biogeographers who study plant-and-animal communities, followed by ecological geographers who study traditional or folk communities, and finally the social geographers of contemporary life who study the least perfect communities; least perfect and successful because, as the internalization of symbolic systems proceeds to the degree that each person has his or her own, conflicts will inevitably emerge, even with the best will in the world.

Whitehead's view of community is thus the reverse of Glenn Tinder's. Tinder's ideal community is a delicate and extremely complicated web of communication, in which each person offers her unique view of reality to another, with the certainty of misunderstanding. Tinder's ideal community, even if it can be achieved, cannot endure: it will tend to revert to traditional community, as traditional community in its turn will revert to biocommunity, and biocommunity will--in the long course of time--revert to mineral community, which, as Whitehead has said, is the most successful of all.

Best wishes,

