

THE HEART OF COMMUNITY

KEYNOTE SPEECH FOR THE 2013 ATI ANNUAL CONFERENCE

BY DAVID GORMAN

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You know, it is such a treat to be back here and see so many familiar faces... I feel like I'm back home among friends...

Winston Churchill had a way with words and he said a lot of very quotable things. One of my favourites which I find very useful in a lot of teaching situations is this one:

“No matter how beautiful the strategy...
occasionally, you might want to check the results...”

But he also said this:

“There are only two things more difficult than giving an afternoon speech — one is climbing a ladder leaning towards you, the other is kissing a girl leaning away from you.”

This is not an afternoon speech, but it is an after-dinner speech. The meal was good, and I know many of you are tired. You've traveled a long way and may even be jet-lagged. So I'll keep it short and simple, or at least I'll try... ;-)

So, here we all are... Obviously we are all dedicated enough to think that this work that we do and this organization we are part of is worth travelling from far and wide.

The theme of this year's Annual Conference is “*Connecting our Community*”...

That's what we humans do, isn't it? We do “community”.

We are, after all, social animals. We thrive in groups. We go crazy in isolation... We're not solitary tigers in the jungle. We are a “pride” of lions, aren't we? And proud of it too...

So... connecting... community... Isn't that a bit redundant? Aren't community and connected the same beast?

Well, sometimes they are... and sometimes they aren't...

There's a grammatical term you might know called a *collective noun*. Don't bother if you've forgotten all your memories of grammar class, because I guarantee that you do know lots of collective nouns — a *swarm* of bees, a *flock* of sheep, a *school* of fish, a *herd* of cows...

I looked up “collective nouns” on the Internet, and I tell you, I found out one thing... There is no shortage of websites full of lists on the Internet. In fact, there is a *plethora* of lists (is *plethora* a collective noun too?).

I found dozens of sites with lists of collective nouns, each listing hundreds of animals along with their respective collective nouns. But, oddly, on each list there was one animal conspicuously absent... Humans. Isn't that strange?

Finally, I found one list which included humans. On that site the collective nouns for humans were “*tribe*”... “*gang*”... “*mob*”... “*race*”... and... wait for it... “*community*”.

A community of humans. That sounds nice, doesn't it?

You've all heard the term: "*The Alexander Community*", and you've probably used it yourself.

In all likelihood what you meant by it was all of us 'doing' the Alexander work, a collective noun that gathers us all together in a sort of warm, fuzzy group. Warm because it is our group; and fuzzy because the boundaries of the term are flexible, sometimes including Alexander teachers and trainees as well as enthusiastic Alexander students, at other times only stretching so far as to include teachers, or maybe even just your own local group of Alexander people you hang out with.

Here's the Alexander Community — the group of "us" (the Alexander Technique), as opposed to "them", the whole rest of the world — the non-Alexander community — which isn't really a community at all, just a whole bunch of people vastly outnumbering us, doing all kinds of different things, mostly distinguished by the fact that they aren't the Alexander Technique...



Of course, I'm wildly exaggerating here by using such a large "Alexander Technique" circle compared to everyone else. We are actually more like this tiny speck... but we live in hope...

However, all those "others" are not just a mass of disorganized individuals milling around us looking for the Alexander Technique so they too can join our community... though I bet they would if they only knew we existed...

They've all got their own communities: the yoga community (of which I am part even though I don't 'do' yoga, but I do teach yoga teachers), the Feldenkrais community, the scientific community, the francophone community, the Ukrainian community, the model train community, the *wooden* model train community, the *19th-century* wooden model train community...

You get the idea.

There's even a community of Dave Gormans brought together by the English comedian, Dave Gorman, who went around the world hunting down Dave Gormans and turned his adventure into award-winning theatre and a BBC TV series. That was my 15 minutes of fame, right there... all used up...

Look around you and you will see that communities are everywhere. Remember, human beings do community...

They can be small like the tiny community of Nobel Prize winners or the even smaller one of Canadian female Nobel Prize winners. Or they can be huge like the whole scientific community, or smallish but growing rapidly, like the Alexander community. They can be international and widely-spread like... well... like Alexander Technique International. Or they can be local like the small group of friends you go running with who all live in your neighbourhood.

But what makes a community? Is it just the fact of something in common? The fact of mere membership in a group? The term is often used that way. Whether you are a runner or not, you have probably heard the term: "*the running community*". Maybe you even thought of yourself as part of the running community because you once bought running shoes... and then you ran...

Maybe you listened to the news one day and heard an item like this?

“The running community was saddened by the death of 69-year old Nova Scotia runner, Paul Collins, winner of many marathons, who ran for Canada in the 1952 Olympics. In the early 1980s when he was close to 60 years old he was the world-record holder for many ultra-long distance events ranging from 200 kilometres to 6-days.”

Imagine that — 6-day races! He was so good at it that he even ran in his sleep!

The running community was saddened by his death...? Which running community? You, the morning runner-around-the-block who never heard of him before? Were you saddened?

You might have been curious if you heard that news item, but if you did not know of him you were probably not unduly saddened.

But, how about the tight-knit community of ultra-long distance runners who *did* know him and who knew what he went through to get to the top? Almost certainly *they* were affected by his death.

Why? Because they were *HIS* community. They ran with him. They shared trials and tribulations with him. They celebrated and commiserated together. They knew him personally and they had feelings about him. They all shared hard-won knowledge and many gruelling and triumphant experiences about ultra-long distance running.

But how about the model train community? Were they saddened by his death? Probably not. There was nothing in the news about him having had a model train hobby, let alone an ultra-long distance model-train hobby.

Or how about the Alexander community? Were they saddened by his death? Were *YOU* saddened by his death?

Well, did you know that this Collins from Nova Scotia was the same man who wrote this:

“Through the Alexander Technique I was able to rehabilitate my running after 25 years of being unable to run through injuries, to the extent that I was able to set ten world records for veterans in 1982.”

And did you know that this was the same Paul Collins who trained as an Alexander teacher with Walter Carrington back in the 1960s? The same Paul Collins who then ran a training course for Alexander teachers in London and later in Devon.

In fact, there may well be people in this audience right now who were trained by him and his wife Betty. Robert Rickover, Michael Gelb, and Jeremy Chance were all trained as Alexander teachers by that same Paul Collins. I taught with Paul many times at conferences and in his training course and he was one of the most intelligent and brilliant teachers I have ever met.

In fact, I had the most remarkable “Alexander” experience of my life at his hands in Aalborg, Denmark when we were teaching together at a conference put on by the late Chris Stevens.

In one of the sessions he used me as the subject of a demonstration, taking me in and out of monkey in the most amazing way... down and up, deeper and higher, until he got me actually rising up off the ground and then, with a very light little push on my back he sent me boinging like a kangaroo across the grass.

It was the most incredible experience. I wasn't doing anything. I wasn't even “making a movement”. I was just a huge human spring — sponging, sponging, sponging — felt like at least a

foot off the ground at each bound — absolutely effortless — and travelling over the lawn so fast eventually I over-balanced and pitched forward on my face in the grass.

He had obviously done this before with others. He was very practiced at it and he got it going in me in a less than a minute. Unfortunately, the secret of how he did it seems to have been lost with his death in 1995...

So, yes, the Alexander community *was* saddened by his death.

But not *THE* Alexander community — *HIS* Alexander community. A community made up of those who knew him.

In other words, the kind of community that is really connected is not just any plain old collection of all the members with the same name or title.

A true connected community is one that is “our community” — those we have communed with.

True community is not a fact... It is a *feeling*.

It's not *membership*... It is *fellowship*.

It is the fellowship of shared feeling, of shared interests, shared knowledge, and shared experiences. The fellowship of looking around us on our journey and spotting others on the same path who are looking back at us knowing that we know they are there, and that they know that we are here, and all of us being glad to see each other.

It does not depend on a name. In fact, the name can obscure it and give us a faulty appreciation that community is there when it is not.

One summer back in the early 1990s I was invited to present a workshop at a large conference in the wilds of western Massachusetts, called “*Body-Oriented Psychotherapy*” (the conference, not the area) which was largely aimed at opening up the experience of “mind-oriented” psychotherapists to how “body work” can also move people's thoughts and emotions and change their inner states and reactivity. Tommy Thompson was there to present on the Alexander Technique too, and there were dozens and dozens of other practitioners of almost every stripe of physical and touching work.

This was in the middle of a period when I was experiencing a lot of flak from my “Alexander colleagues” in the UK due to my enthusiasm in developing the AT work in my training course beyond their ideas of the boundaries of tradition, shall we say — otherwise known as “*doing something new*”.

These were people, who at the time, I had been thinking of as my “community”. Receiving this kind of reaction — rejection — was a new experience for me, but I'm sure many of you here know exactly how it feels to have members of the “Alexander Community” reject you and your work. And I'm sure for many of you it was a far more vicious rejection than I experienced.

It was a disturbing thing to find that part of the community in which I had been so welcome for years had turned their backs on me. I was rather happy to get out of London that summer...

But it was good thing, because two things struck me about that week at the conference.

One was that it was a big conference and there were multiple presentations at once so you had to choose which to attend, and if you did not personally know the work or the presenter you had to consult a multi-page booklet listing all the presentations complete with blurbs about what their work was and what they were going to do.

What was remarkable was that all the descriptions sounded the same. Every one was a variation on this theme: *“I work with the whole person to free them up from old traumas/habits and release them into the present and being more in touch with themselves.”* I didn’t know there could be so many different ways of saying the same thing.

But when I went and checked out some of the actual presentations, the work itself couldn’t have been more different from one presenter to another, one method to the other. But it wasn’t the differences so much that struck me. It was that, no matter the method, or the technique, we actually were all engaged on much the same endeavour — wanting to help people become free from their chronic problems.

This brings me to the second thing. During those days I met a lot of new people. Everyone was passionate about their own work. But some were dogmatic, some were prejudiced, some would not, or could not, look beyond their own discipline. Many others though were interested in, and very excited by, the possibilities in other people’s work. Many were pioneers in their own way and had met reaction from their own traditions. They had struggled to build up their vision and turn it into a new work that helped others.

I remember sitting on a rock by the lake as the sun went down talking with a few people I had connected with and feeling a great joy and a sense of belonging. The thought that came to me was: *“I’ve found my community”*. I recognized these people and they recognized me, and we all appreciated what we’d found in each other...

Now the point I am getting at is this: that real community is not in a name like Alexander Technique or any other name. It is about finding those who we can recognize walking through the unknown on the same path. We see them and they also see us travelling along beside them — regardless of the name on their shirts or the sign on their office.

But community is not just people on the same path who see each other. What if they see you on the same path and don’t want you there? What if they feel that it is their path and that you don’t deserve to be there?

Real community is what happens when people on the same path, when they see us, are happy that there are others on the same path, and welcome us on the journey and are excited about what we can share and how we can help each other along the way. This kind of community gladdens the heart.

This is no minor thing. We humans are social animals and “belonging” is in our nature. It is one of our most basic and fundamental existential needs.

Not belonging — that is, being rejected, being ostracized or exiled — is painful, damaging and downright unhealthy for us. It hurts the heart. It leaves scars and challenges our innocent tendency to welcome everyone and wag our tails when we see them...

Real community, on the other hand, is powerful medicine... And powerful healing... After that conference, I came back to London to face the coming year of running my training course with a new sense of strength and support to carry on. My previously negative sense of disillusionment had changed to a positive one. It was a good thing that I had become disillusioned — that my illusions had dropped away — the illusions that we were all one big happy Alexander family.

I mean, I knew it before — you’d have to be blind and deaf not to see that — some of the original group who trained with Alexander himself had actually come to blows over who was right and who was not... But I had never been on the outside before...

So... Why am I here today ? And why are *you* all here today? The short answer is this: Community...

It was no coincidence that the period I was just speaking about was also the time when ATI was forming and I think many of us came together in our own ways with a vision of starting something new, and making it different from what had come before. Of designing a community that would be a reflection of our values and an adequate container for how we understood our work.

The Alexander work is about openness and flexibility, and ATI... that is, WE... have been steadfast in creating a structure for our organization that mirrors these same principles... A structure that is open and allowing. A structure that is about quality and not quantity. A structure that is flexible not rigid. One that is not trying to protect tradition but that is more than ready to change things at any time so that they can be even better.

ATI is the first Alexander community which refused to start from a premise of "*Here is the Alexander Technique which we received in stone, and here are the rules to make sure that everyone squeezes into it*". Instead ATI said, "*Here are all of us exploring the work that inspires us, so the Alexander Technique is that which fits us all*". And that's a huge difference.

You know what that difference is? That's trust.

ATI is also the first Alexander community that said, "*You know what, let's all sit down together and work out a definition of the Alexander Technique by seeing what we have in common and let's agree that the breadth and the width and the length of diversity we see among us shall be the measure of the Technique.*"

You know what that is? That's acceptance.

Yeah, sure, there were (and, no doubt, still are) some rocks in the road, but I have to say that ATI is the only professional group I've belonged to that I actually enjoy being part of... And I have been a member of quite a few... In fact, I've been on the Boards of quite a few (CanSTAT, NASTAT, and STAT) and I was involved in starting a few (CanStat, NASTAT, and the Affiliated Societies)...

In my humble opinion, ATI is the first organization that walks its talk... That treats everyone as a valued member with a say in what happens, even non-teachers... That has dared to embrace evolution and change, rather than fear change and react to perceived revolution.

You know, I actually look forward to coming to meetings like these, not just to see all these old friends in my community, but also because I come away afterward with a positive glow of belonging...

This leads me to the second part of my talk...

Here's an interesting quote I ran across from Wendell Berry, the essayist and environmentalist. He wrote:

I believe that the community - in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures - is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms."

— Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays* (pg. 146, *Health is Membership*)

He's saying that our communities are not just there so we can further our own individual ends and validate our credentials to the world. Rather, that our communities are the very means to our own health and well-being.

Now it seems to me that creating such a healthy community in the world today involves two big areas... One of these areas is more basic and primary and it needs to be taken care of first if the other is to have any chance of coming to fruition.

That first area is the creating of the community itself which happens because enough of us find our way to each other and recognize this as our group. This is something you feel in your heart by how you are treated when you enter the group, and how being part of the group brings out the best in you.

You cannot "make" a community happen, but you can recognize it when it is there.

I think we are well on our way to that already in ATI.

But we need to do more than just discover our community and then join it. We also need to *support that community*. We need to stand up for our community, even sometimes fight for it.

One of the things we will be discussing at our meetings soon is how ATI — all of us — can connect in a new way with three of our ATI local regions (in France, Germany and Austria) who have recently had to formally constitute themselves as national societies under the laws of their countries so they can be recognized by their national governments in the face of the other national Alexander societies who have excluded them.

To achieve this, we in ATI will once again need to evolve and grow our structure... And it isn't just ATI that grows when we do this. We all grow when we accept these challenges and make the appropriate changes rather than resist them.

When we support our common path and vision, we *prove* there is trust between us. This allows us all to be able to be ourselves and to join in without fear. It allows us to feel accepted and to try out new things. All together this lets us build on our collective strengths (which, after all, is all we really have, isn't it?)...

Or, to put it differently, when we first find our community we tend to recognize the value that we find for ourselves IN our community – what the community gives to us, that is, the value of what everyone else is doing FOR the community.

That's what makes us want to join. And this allows us to unleash our own energy and abilities and bring them TO the community... This mutual appreciation and willingness to help is what makes a strong community.

That way we don't just survive, we thrive.

We create a community with heart.

A community which will support us all as long as we treasure it and don't take it for granted...

This is the sort of community that Wendell Berry calls the smallest unit of health.

As we build such a strong and secure community we can direct our attention to the second part, which is perhaps a bigger challenge — to grow that community and bring positive things to others outside our community...

ATI will probably keep expanding within itself as we train new teachers and that expansion will be healthy to the extent that we keep our values and all that makes our community attractive.

But I think it is important to be clear that expanding our community out to the “everyone else” outside us does NOT mean inviting others to crowd into our little circle and start doing things our way. Anymore than we are likely to throw out all the parts of our vision to join in the little circle of some other community.

Instead we must take the next step and go further than Wendell Berry’s smallest unit of health. We need to look toward even larger units of health. This means recognizing that not only is the health of an individual in isolation a contradiction in terms, but that a healthy community in isolation is also contradiction in terms.

Our one-to-one work with students is only as powerful as we are able to live our own free and open use when we are close to and in contact with them. Can any student’s habitually strained and tight use resist for long in the face of open and free contact with someone else whose use is so well-supported and expanded?

By the same token, our organization is only as supportive and healthy for each of us who are in it as we are able to live our principles with each other and remain open and inviting.

The next level does not mean expanding ATI. It means expanding our connections to other communities with bonds of trust and acceptance. And ATI will be only as powerful in doing that as we all are able to remain well-supported and strong enough to reach out to those others who we recognize even when they do not recognize us... yet.

We’re already doing that in ATI, aren’t we – recognizing other groups even though they do not recognize us?

And when we meet them can we be truly happy to see them and smile at them first even if they scowl back? Well, of course we can, because we can see that they are there on the path right beside us... Even if they do not see us, we ARE there !! Right beside them...

And you know, it doesn’t take a big budget to do all this, or advertising campaign, or public relations companies.

It just takes being ourselves. It takes being excited by what we do and inspired by the possibilities as we interact with others. Remember, if they are people whose work we would find interesting and exciting then they too want to make connections.

You already know what happens to you as an individual when you trust your innate system enough to give up control and allow your wholeness and freedom to expand you... We all know how deeply our lives have changed because of that. That’s why we are teaching — to share this with others...

Let’s also pat ourselves on the back here today for how we have also been achieving much the same thing as a community by trusting each other enough to give up control and fear, and to open up discussion and find consensus on what we do.

So I ask you, if we trust the same process in all our dealings with those others around us, can we doubt that the connections extending outside ourselves will also grow and will expand?

This kind of community is such a big attraction. Who could resist it for long?

So, let’s toast ATI — A Community with Heart !

(now, where is my glass of wine?)