

Transcript~The Community of the Future, Pioneers in California

A Lecture by Professor Raghavan Iyer
Lobero Theater, Santa Barbara, 1975

Dr. Carl Rogers: Now Professor Iyer is a professor of political philosophy, Rhodes Scholar from India to England, former faculty member at Oxford, member of the planning staffs of the Republic of India, a longtime teacher, one of the great teachers on our campus. His recent book on the thought of Mohandas Gandhi has become a book of international standing. He teaches anarchist thought, a course on anarchist thought. He doesn't advocate anarchist thought, perhaps. Perhaps he does. It's a political science course.

He teaches a course on politics and literature. And above all, as he says, he teaches a course on the dialectic from Plato to Mao, a properly specialized topic. We are privileged this evening to hear from Professor Iyer, who will speak to us on the community of the future pioneers in California.

Prof. Raghavan Iyer: Ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege for me to be on the same platform as Dr. Carl Rogers. In hearing his talk, I was struck by the convergence of standpoint, not only between his thinking and mine, but no doubt of many of you.

Above all, reading Dr. Rogers, I've been struck by the courage of his emphasis, even in client-counselor relationships, upon unconditional personal regard, without reservation, without judgment. In this sense, he is as archaistic as Jesus, who pleaded, judge not, lest ye be judged. And yet, in a time of confusion, constant change, continual crises, we're always involved in raising what are our tentative half-judgments to the height of finalities, closing the door to the future, limiting the possibility of growth in others and in ourselves.

So anyone like Dr. Rogers, who emphasizes the importance of unconditionality in human relationships, is, in my view, seeing beyond the apparent constants of human nature to that mysterious underground in which many of the fundamental origins of the

capacity to change are to be found in human beings. Can these germs, hidden within the depths of human beings for change in themselves and in their lives, be the basis of communities, communes; conceptions at several levels and in concentric circles, of community in a new and more fundamental sense than any yet known in history? That is the question to which I am addressing myself in the course of this talk. And in doing so, I shall first of all present for purposes of our understanding some kind of definition of a community.

As it turns out, a definition that I made up some years ago focuses on unconditionality. A community is any collection of human beings, diverse but more or less united, who share in common an unconditional and continuing commitment, either to ends or to values or to beliefs, or maybe only to procedures, but such that they can rely upon each other to give voluntary compliance with accepted obligations, and even more, who are capable of self-correction, self-expression and self-transcendence. In other words, put in this large and exacting way, a community is as utopian as the ideal man or the ideal relationship, but to the extent to which every human being is involved in some kind of correction, constantly from outside in his environment, he is involved in criticism of others, which is often only his way of criticizing and defining himself, to the extent to which everyone sees through formal laws and coercive sanctions and recognizes some alternative among friendships or in some context or the other, of an easier, more natural, trustful context in which he can free himself and grow, to the extent, in other words, that human life is larger than social structures, that man is vaster than all the classifications of man.

To that extent, there is a deep sense in which the large definition of the community is close to some element in every one of us, that element which cannot be abolished, cannot be annulled, does not owe anything either to laws or institutions or constitutions, which sees beyond our parents and our environment and our teachers, which includes lonely moments, perhaps of bewilderment before the vastitude and the magnificent beauty of nature, that in every human being which makes him want, seemingly, to get to the top of some professional scale, but deep down only represents a desire to get to the top of a

mountain, his own inward journey to some invisible summit from where he can see his life, if not steadily, at least less unsteadily than at other times, if not as a whole, at least sufficiently as a whole, to make sense and have self-respect as he recognizes and approaches the moment of death. No doubt, all the trends that everyone talks about and which were also so poignantly mentioned by Dr. Rogers at the beginning are true, evident, and we would all agree with them. But to me, all of these really represent a challenge to consciousness.

What we are witnessing is a fragmentation of consciousness more clearly seen in the structure of our society towards which the whole world is tending, an excessive increase of rules, complexities, rules, pressures of every kind, such that human beings, even with enormous social mobility, cannot meet the challenge from outside because of inadequate psychological mobility. Dr. Rogers once characterized, and I wholly agree with him, the contemporary revolution is real because it pleads for flexibility against rigidity, against rigidity of educational institutions, religious institutions, political institutions. On the other hand, the very pace of change makes us want - while we want to be flexible, open-ended, ever willing to change - to do more than merely adapt.

We are looking for a basis of continuity amidst the flux. And here it is that the younger generation has not merely something to teach the older generations, but indeed a pointer to what will be crucial, in my view, in the future. Human beings, when their fragmentation of consciousness becomes insupportable, either through meditation or through music, through silence and solitude, if not through traditional forms of worship and prayer, through self-created rituals, rites of the sacred, they have to find a way by which they can dig into the very depths of their potential realm and draw a latent energy such that they can have a tangible, ever-existing sense of the unlimited at the very time when limitations are pressing.

And therefore, given the broad statement of what is involved in a community, we might ask then this question. Surely, the whole of American history, over 200 years, has been not merely some kind of homogenized search for a national community. There was

something more to the American dream, which was understood not only by the so-called successes, but even more, perhaps poignantly, by the failures.

All the many immigrants who came to set up communes and communities, which eventually, no doubt, died, but who still somewhere felt that what they represented was something real with a meaning for other human beings. There were over a hundred communes involving about a hundred thousand people. Of these, no doubt very few, like the communities of the Shakers, lasted for over a hundred years. The Rappites amounted to almost a hundred years, the Icarians lasted for 50 years, but there were many, many more which were transient, died almost within a few months after they were born.

But in all of these, there was an assertion of an impulse, which might have been premature in certain respects, might have been misconceived and mistaken in the narrowness of the basis of allegiance or the degree of reinforcement through controls, but nonetheless they represented a kind of daring, a kind of freedom that is part of the American dream. And if we look at all of these, not in terms of merely what went wrong, but what we could learn from them, there are certain lessons that could be drawn, which are not merely abstract lessons, lessons that are now again being drawn by those who over the last 10 years have lived in, have attempted every kind of communal, semi-communal and mere transient nomadic forms of existence. One of the lessons, said Dr. Morgan, looking at these communities, was the fact that they were exclusive, that they were not universal.

And here I suggest there are very few people anywhere on the globe who can rise to that ultimate affirmation of the American dream represented by Dr. Buckminster Fuller. At a time when doomsday seers talk in quasi-racialist language, reinforcing the same age-old fear of the whole and of diversity, Bucky Fuller instead says, no utopia will ever be real or valid unless it is for all, unless it is for the 100% of human beings who live on the globe. And he says the resources of the world today are used on behalf of about 44%, but unless and until they can be used for all, there will be no kingdom of heaven on earth.

Well, if so, does this mean that any one community, any one communal experiment must take on the burden of all? Does this mean that there must be a once-and-for-all and total change in the social structure? This was, of course, a natural thought of many pioneers of communes, that they would not only show the way, but they ignored that there were predecessors before and those yet to come. And when they came to America, of course, they forgot the very truths of continuity of human history that all others forgot, namely that there is birth, that there is growth, that there is suffering, and that there is death. And the whole of life must accommodate a preparation for the moment of death, as it must also welcome the moment of birth of other human beings, that we are in this not merely together in space, but that there is a kind of community over time.

And there are many orders of time. At one level, time is merely the succession of events. At another level, it is a transmission of ideas that cut across pure temporal divisions or historical delimitations into epochs.

And therefore, if we try to draw lessons from the old communes, we might say that they were attempting something very real on a local plane. They wanted to be universal, but because of the intensity of isolation from the rest of the community, which was more possible in America than in Europe, in time, these communes became unself-critical. There was no more principle of negation built into the very structure of the community, so in time, you had the very same desire which you find all over in society, to settle down, to become bourgeois.

And this would be a good point of transition to my next consideration, which is taking not the whole of America, but taking California into the picture. What was distinctive to California? Now here, if we go back as early as the late 19th century, someone like Royce could see California, essentially, in terms of social irresponsibility, sloth, indolence in this climate, and the impossibility ever of getting people to be truly cultivated to do anything which required concentration. In other words, this was a cybernetic, hedonistic image of California, which you still get, of course, in other states today in the United States.

But there were also other voices. There were those who felt that California was not merely to be assimilated into some Mediterranean mythology, that there was something else involved here, which was a vaster mixture and a richer mixture than elsewhere, that it was a logical culmination of the American dream. And after pioneers had reached the limit of physical settlement, there was another kind of pioneering involved in another kind of journey.

Whitman put this, of course, in his characteristic way, very broadly and boldly. He said when he came to California, he asked the question, what is it that I started a long time ago, and how can I get back to that? It's a venture into the interior realms, you might say, of consciousness, digging into the very depths of one's being, going beyond ancestral ties, racial affinities, cultural and social conditioning. It is asking deeper questions.

Others saw this in terms of a mix of North and South, Latin and Anglo-Saxon, East and West, beginning to happen, of course, more in our own time, and a mix of many other kinds, also of Europe and America. But with all of this, the history of California is even more perhaps in the history of the United States as a whole, a history of lost opportunities, of misfired innovations, a history of abortions, and no doubt in a state where perhaps there are more abortions than births, more divorces than marriages. How can we then, in such a California, get excited, be credible to each other, even in talking about the community of the future? Well, here, let me invoke Plato, who, when he spoke of *koinonia*, said that a community involves a sharing of pleasures and of pains.

I think when Californians are sharing pleasures for what they are worth, they are quite forgetful of communities. But when they share pains, then they experience an immense void. When they experience post-coital sadness, when they experience the pain after every new wave of gush and excitement, when they experience that deep discontent, which may not always be divine, may sometimes be demoniac, but they know that there is something more.

And here they remind me of what was said by a Sufi sage long ago, when one of his students came to him and asked him, "Why is it, O Master, that people come to you "for discourses, for teaching, for lectures, but they don't really want enlightenment, and you merely get them to become engaged in some activity?" The master replied, "Very few of those who think they want enlightenment want anything but a new form of engagement. And very few of those who will get engaged will get engaged to the point where they can see through the activities, because they will get so totally consumed in it that they will have no opportunity to see beyond. But those few who are confident in their engagements, that they do not need to put themselves totally into it and can see limitations, they will say there is something beyond."

They do not know what that something beyond is, but they are certain that there is something beyond. And when they are ready to maintain, in consciousness, that conception of something beyond, then they are ready, ready for those processes of training that might lead to enlightenment. In other words, I believe that California, then, is to be characterized, not by its successes, but by its failures. And these failures prepare it for that ultimate hubris, which is still the privilege of the American, to think big, to think the impossible, and to ask whether even in this absurd town, which is such a ruin compared to what it might have been and what many of us wish it could be, Santa Barbara, even here, something can happen.

Whittier may not be wrong when he said here could be the second founding, but this could be a very different kind of founding than can be dated, than can get into the media. And here I come, then, to the most important lesson we have learned from the failures of the last 10 to 15 years. A few of us understood this at the very beginning, at the time of the hippie movement, that the moment you get publicity, the movement will be killed even before it can really get going.

They were right in regard to the logic of inversion. Society had reached a point of such absurdity, you had to invert everything. Teachers were not teachers, parents were not parents, scholars were not scholars. You had to allow each one to have his own ego game

while at the same time, insisting that you were not had by any kind of phoniness because you were concerned with that meaning which could be sustained through trust and love and openness shown concretely in everyday relations. They were right in the perception of the logic of inversion, but of course, they could not stay apart from all the institutions which tried to capture and formulate what they were doing and above all, the incredible problem of new entrants, which was also the problem of the old communes in America as with the communes in California. What do you do about new entrants? Either you close the community to all new entrants, in which case you get a boring uniformity of belief and practice and then, of course, intense mutual bitchiness, or you open the community to new entrants and every wave of new entrants will produce a dilution of what was there in the beginning.

Now, this, you might say, is a problem. It's a problem of society, but it's a problem that is peculiarly American because the logic of assimilation, the logic of homogenization, the logic of constant new entrants, that is the meaning of America. In that sense, it must always aim at the sky, at universality, despite all the attempts of all historians of America, academics mostly, and most people to limit America to some narrow view of a Judeo-Christian succession to the Roman Empire, thereby making impossible howlers historically, philosophically.

America is that country in which every man can define himself and where he can turn where he wills to the world's heritage. It is that country in which each man can make his own authentic selection out of the whole heritage of humanity. To do this, if he is not helped by his schools, by his parents, and by the conformist culture of Middle America, he must negate it.

So the first step then is to come loose, come loose from that uptight structure. That was done, it is irreversible, that is spreading every year. Even people who are in their middle-class existence because of their own children are getting affected by this determination to come loose.

That is a painful step, a necessary step, and of course it has produced a great deal of chaos, and that chaos, of course, is no worse than the chaos produced by institutions that have rules but are inefficient and don't work fairly and properly, so that truly we could say that the whole formal structure today makes America so much less efficient than that of many other countries of the world. So in this context, we might then ask, given that some lessons may be learned both from 200 years of American history and a few lessons from the last 10 years, what then might be the community of the future? The community of the future, I suggest, would be one that will involve fundamentals, the allocation of space, the allocation of time, the allocation of energy in the lives of human beings. It will have a macro perspective, but at the same time have a micro application.

At the level of micro application, it may tie up with institutions, but essentially those who enter into such communities will see beyond institutions. Some may drop out, others may cop out, and there will be those who are psychologically outside their jobs, schools, institutions, psychologically outside, even though for the sake of livelihood, they may be inside them. But there could be, of course, also those who are capable, who have the imagination and the determination to create with a minimum means, sometimes purely by throwing away excess, by juxtaposing skills that otherwise do not come together in the market, create new, as it were, experiments in new kinds of institutions.

It will take a very long time before we could really arrive at self-regenerating institutions. No society had a secret in regard to self-regenerating institutions, but there were other cultures which knew something about longevity. America knows many things, but it has still to learn the secret of institutional longevity.

It took Plato several hundred years to prepare for the Platonic Academy, which lasted 900 years. There were small groups of individuals who began small houses, monasteries, colleges, which became the University of Oxford and has lasted for so many centuries with some fidelity to what was in the beginning. I do not believe that Americans are unaware of this.

When everything is fragile, when everything is transient, and when they're also willing, unlike earlier generations, to accept the fact of death, they are willing to discuss immortality. They are willing also to find those ways in which they could thread together moments, days, weeks, months, years in their lives, and they are searching. And the search, of course, is intense and poignant because there are so many mistakes, so many, as it were, misfirings.

And at every point, as it were, there is a reenactment, a repetition of the same problems which characterize the total structure. So one way, then, of looking at how these allocations of space, time, energy will come eventually is by seeing all institutions, the whole structure, in terms of a series of concentric circles. Those who take decisions, you might say the establishment, if you like, though fortunately there is no real establishment in America which believes in itself just as well. But nonetheless, there is a core of those who control power, take decisions, and that is true at many levels. Outside that ring, there is a large number of followers, people who are often apathetic, who will blindly go along, and some who will even think it unpatriotic to question decisions taken by central agencies. Outside it, you might say, in the outer circle beyond the second, there are the negators, the critics.

You might call them radicals, call them revolutionaries, but essentially they are people who are more concerned with talk and analysis than with action and example. And they themselves are the victims of the same social structure which they seek to negate and reject. But these negators are important, and they certainly have played an important part in the last 10 years.

But beyond that, there is still another ring in which there are those who are willing to be quiet for a while, who are willing to move away from the limelight, and to be engaged, to be fully occupied, and even fulfilled at some level in pioneering new ways of living, new ways of sharing. This could go all the range from communal households in which people learn to beat inflation, share, as it were, uses of time, space, and money, but also find constructive forms of expression of energy, and indeed it might also include people

who merely get together to listen to music or who get together to meditate, range all the way from these to bolder and more ambitious experiments on a larger scale on vast farms and estates. But in all of them, the problem will always be the same as today in every kind of structure, how to ensure that there is an unconditional commitment to certain values and also to persons.

Persons are sacred, but not to the forms, not to the formalities. Now, to put this in a somewhat academic language, how to ensure that people will gain confidence in using rules so precisely that they will also have rules skepticism built into them because they know that no general rule could ever fit a unique situation. People can gain so much confidence in the fulfillment of particular roles that they can also show role flexibility, and indeed, in some cases, even reach to role transcendence.

To give a simple example, you might get a man in the county or a man in a permit office who knows all the gobbledygook with legislation, but he thinks that you're straightforward and you've really come to him in an attitude of trust. He may show you how to cut corners. He knows the rules well enough to be confident that he's not violating them, but they can, as it were, be both subserved and still you can have a freedom of action. I believe that this has always gone on. Human beings don't have to be told to be informal.

Human beings don't have to be told to see beyond laws and rules because otherwise they could not fill up the large areas of human life which are unstructured. But where human beings become self-conscious, and this is a function of confidence, confidence in one's ability to operate the structure, they can combine precision with flexibility, combine precision with transcendence. And here I do believe, strange as it may seem, that the most crucial factor of all is actually the imminence of death, even the talk of catastrophe, the constant reminder of suffering.

This is crucial to the maturation of the American mind, but it does not involve anything that would sacrifice what is quintessential to the American dream, indeed it is a kind of

growing up which may for the first time make the vision of the Founding Fathers meaningful and relevant outside the formal apparatus of rules and institutions to creating, if not islands of brotherhood, creating areas of initiative, areas of commonality, making discoveries, enlarging and enriching the imagination, but above all, breaking away altogether from the very obsession with success and failure which is so corroding to human consciousness, the obsession with status. And here I might therefore end by putting this hope in terms of a very profound observation of Santayana, who, not being an American by birth, and indeed he died outside America in Spain, thought a great deal about the American experiment, and he thought about it again when he came to California. Basically he saw America as a contest between the aggressive man and the genteel woman.

Now this will sound strange today, but this is historically very true and very interesting, that again and again men emerged who, though aggressive, they became the purveyors of the creativity that is at the core of the American impulse. But in time, from maiden aunts to wives, those emerged who wanted security, who wanted also to become sophisticated, who wanted to become what they thought Americans were not. And, of course, this goes back to Henry James and so on, but in this kind of oscillation, there was a constant, you might say, peril to the creative impulse.

Well, a Marxist-Leninist would put it in a different way, the bourgeoisification of the proletariat. Here came the world's proletariat, but as they became bourgeoisified, that deeper impulse behind America, which has nothing to do with class or status or structure, which has to do with the wanderer, the nomad, the free man, that impulse is obscure, or it becomes limited into hagiography of a nationalist variety, a substitute for real feeling, a real experience of the openness of the wide-open spaces and their equivalent in the human mind. Now, Santiago thought that in California, for the very reasons that others criticized it, its lack of gentility, its crudity, its slothfulness, that it was impossible here for maiden aunts to prevail, it was impossible here for gentility to come up on top and eliminate the creative impulse.

And, of course, he also thought that whereas elsewhere in America, people came to exchange the strong transcendentalism of the early years for a wishy-washy admiration of nature, saying, oh, how beautiful nature is, that's all ours, it's all America. Instead of that, he felt that here in California, when people went to the Sierras, they somewhere felt something else, a negation of argument, a negation of logic, a sense of the vanity of human life, the frailty of so many of our structures and relationships. In other words, that nature here made people think beyond America itself.

It made them have larger thoughts about human frailty and also the fragility of human institutions in relation to the whole. But certainly this must be true in relation to the future. The future, said philosophers, will never resemble the past.

The future is much larger than the past. If you take man's age for about 20 million years and put it into a 24-hour scale, 6,000 years of recorded history does not amount to half a minute. Who is entitled, in terms of what we already know about the age of man, to set limits on the future? When people set limits on the future, history is finished for them, but not for others.

I believe there are many people here today who are willing to cooperate with the future, who are not threatened by the universal extension of the logic of the American dream to the whole of humanity, who are also willing, despite past mistakes, to persist and to continue to make experiments, experiments in the use of space and time and energy. And I believe that one day, maybe perhaps even in our lifetime, perhaps around the year 2000, there could still be those who, remembering the early and difficult times of pioneering, might say, like the poet, "We dreamers, we derided, we mad blind men who see, we bear ye witness, ere ye come, that ye shall be."

Thank you.