Jan Winhall: Intentional communities

Proactive Mindfulness *March 2017*



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For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Jan: We're going to explore today the topic of building community, and maybe to step back a little bit in the beginning to say, "Well, what is it that makes it important to ask even about that? Why is it that we make communities? What is it about a kind of need that we have, as human beings, to gather together". So, just to put that in context: I started a community of, a kind of community, that's based on a practice called Focusing, but we can talk about that in a much broader sense today, too. Different kinds of communities that people create that are, tend to be, I guess, the way people come together around a theme.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: It can be a religious theme, it can be some kind of a practice around something like yoga, or a meditation practice. It can be a community of politically-minded people. Something that tends to bring us together where we share. Something about a common interest and goal, and need maybe. A need.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). We're talking about intentional communities-*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *There is a desire and a need to create them, so maybe we can talk a little bit more about that. Where it's coming from, what that need is, why we're doing that?*

Jan: Yeah, and I think in some ways it goes back to the way in which we come into the world. Where we are so deeply attached and connected for such a long period of time, childhood and adolescence, in the first real community, which is our family. We spend a lot of time in that community. A lot longer than lots of other creatures in the world, so and we seem to be very designed to be that way. Our brains and our emotional regulation system are built around those attachments, those deep

connections within that first real community of our family. I think from that, often, we really seek to recreate that in our lives. Particularly in our kind of lives, in a fast-paced kind of North American society, where we lose often that geographical connection with our family of origin, and we end up in some other place completely - - where do we find that sense of belonging?

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). And so maybe we could talk a little bit about that sense of belonging, not being an abstract notion.*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *In a way, that felt sense of a yearning… What is it that we feel when we miss it? What is it that we feel when we're closer to it? In order to be kind of guided by that sense, as opposed to thinking of it abstractly.*

Jan: Yeah, and I think it's one of those things in Focusing that we talk so much about. That felt sense. The sense of awareness in the body, and that connection with other people in a deeper kind of way, and how we help each other in that connection to ground ourselves and feel a sense of stability, and belonging, and love… Being understood… Being able to relate to another person, in terms of what we value… That's so much a part of what creates our sense of identity of who we are in the world and where we fit. Where we can feel safe.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). And so, again, a phrase like "sense of identity" is something that in ordinary language, can be thought of as something that's a high level, a philosophical or a psychological way of talking… But what we're talking about here is… you're relating it to a sense of feeling safe. To a sense of really belonging that's not abstract… it's a sense of feeling good about being in a certain place, in a certain way.*

Jan: Yeah, and often in these intentional communities that we create, there is a kind of sitting together, a flocking, a huddling, a gathering. Even in a bodily way, when we come together in a circle, or we come together in a church, or a synagogue, or wherever that is, there's a sense of a physical space, and a coming together, and a way of calming and soothing each other in this really powerful understanding of each other's values, and what we think is important in the world, and in our own lives.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah, so that sense of soothing each other, that physical proximity-*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *That echoes the experience we had at a very early age, or the family of origin…*

Jan: Yeah, yeah.

Serge: *That sense of safety…*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *That comes from the huddle of the family.*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *Being together.*

Jan: Yeah, yeah. Sharing what we believe to be really important, and how that gives us a carrying forward, and in a direction in our lives.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: It shapes what we value. It is hugely important, I think, in terms of creating community.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah.*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *Yeah, it shapes what we value.*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *Yeah.*

Jan: What we value shapes our sense of knowing ourselves, our identity. "This is who I am. This is what is important to me, and oh, you have some of that, too? That's important to you, too?" That connection that comes, that interconnectedness is very powerful in an intentional community.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *Yeah. As you talk about it, obviously, one of these things is going to be that there is enough commonality…*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *…among the people who are gathering to make this possible. Not necessarily uniformity, but…*

Jan: No.

Serge: *Yeah.*

Jan: Because diversity is also so important in how the community manages and invites

that diversity. The differences and the conflicts that can arise in any community, that is fascinating, and so important for us to pay attention to. And, in intentional communities, sometimes they're are also structured ways of managing those disruptions that happen in the connection. That's all very fascinating. Because how does a community endure, and welcome differences, and things that feel alien?

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Yeah. That's the challenge.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah. Maybe from there, it sounds like a natural segue into the communities that you know, or the examples of forming a community.*

Jan: Yeah. So, in our Focusing community, we started maybe about four or five years ago, and we share in the teaching and the practice of Focusing, which is really about listening inside, and also listening with another person, so it's very much about a partnership kind of relating to each other, which inherently builds community.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Because we gather together to do that. Maybe that's a bit different than some other communities, where you would maybe have an inner practice, but not necessarily a practice that is inner, or deeper into the body, but also simultaneous with another, so I think that makes it a little bit different in that sense. But there is a gathering.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: A sense of coming together and wanting to build something. I think we do have a way in our community, so it's based on teaching, a lot of it. Teaching courses about different things that people are interested in. Like you might do in a yoga community, too, or a meditation community, or in a religious community, where you would have people giving talks, and things like that.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: We have a gathering place. I think that's important. Although it's so interesting how we're creating communities now, like you are…

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: … online, and people connect in, and there's a way of gathering with people all over the world, which is amazing, and it changes that sense of the physicality of community.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah. With, of course, a limitation…*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *… that the physicality of community, that has a depth of felt presence that's closer to that primal experience of it being in the family.*

Jan: Yes.

Serge: *We're extending the possibility of community, but at the same time, losing some of its value.*

Jan: Yeah, yeah. Like it's different, for me, to sit here with you. I already have a sense of community with you, even though I've never met you personally.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: I've only met you a couple of times online.

Serge: *Right.*

Jan: We share a community, and when we first met, it was, I was trying to place: where do you fit into my community?

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Right? Oh, you're a Focuser? Oh, okay. There's the sense of belonging. Oh, you're a therapist? Oh, okay. Well, there's another sense of belonging. Right? You see how our faces light up.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Because we're activating that sense of engagement with each other, and it's there, and it's like an amazing thing.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: We're online, but still, that's a pretty amazing thing.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah, but so I very much like, as you're doing this, talking about the nitty gritty of how we create connections. How we have a sense of orienting, have a sense of "is there safety? Is there a common point of building the bridge?"*

Jan: Yeah, yeah.

Serge: *This process is very much going on, so if you are in a room with strangers, or with many strangers, there's going to be some looking around, some thinking, some reactions. "Oh, this person seems nice," or "This person reminds me of that," and so little by little, a sense of the back-and-forth process…*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *… of kind of feeling the way around to see whether it feels safe or not, or to what degree it does.*

Jan: Yes, and it's so interesting in the beginnings of groups how we see that happen, right?

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: That people are kind of looking across and, "What are the things I have in common with you?" "What don't I have in common with you?" "What do I like about you?" "What don't I like about you?" In the beginning of our classes when we come together, in the first week in particular, we spend time really paying attention to, "What is it that we need from each other in order to feel safe?"

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Willing to come out, and to connect in a deeper way, because in Focusing, we connect in a deeper way…

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: … down in the body, and it's much more vulnerable place to be with people, so we want to really pay attention to that. Especially in the very beginning of the group process. Our classes are usually eight to ten weeks long, so we're together, and we explore a theme. People deepen their sharing and their process, so in the beginning, we really focus on, "What is it that each of us needs in order to feel a sense of safety and connection?"

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: I think that's crucial in intentional communities. That piece of safety and connecting. And also: What do we, what kind of structure do we have available to us if that sense of safety and connection becomes disrupted?

Serge: *Yeah.*

Jan: Knowing, that there is a structure there, and that we have a way of being able to use that structure to get to work through and get to the other side of whatever that disruption is, and then carry on.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Rather than what happens, I think, in so many communities: there's the breakdown, but there isn't the structure, and the community dissolves, and people feel a repeated sense of being disheartened.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah, yeah.*

Jan: It's really sad.

Serge: *Yeah, and so it's interesting that the same applies whether we're talking about, say, a group, the gathering of a group that's going to last only three hours, or a larger repeated group that's going to continue over time, or a community of learning, or a more permanent community. There's no shortcut for actually establishing safety. Establishing that respect. Establishing some ground rules, so the very presence of the possibility, accepting the possibility, of a threat, as opposed to simply assuming that because we're together, every thing is going to be all right.*

Jan: Yeah, that's naive.

Serge: *Yeah.*

Jan: I mean, conflict is an inherent and wonderful part of life.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: It's just there, and then it gets very complex sometimes, because it runs up against all kinds of issues in life that challenge us, and make us feel frightened maybe, or small and diminished. People say things, and one person feels shamed by the other, or judged by the other in some way. Where is that line of accepting and welcoming, which is such a huge value in intentional communities, often, right?

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Certainly in the Focusing community. Being accepting and inclusive. Where's the line between that and then being too accepting to the point where people are not safe?

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: That's fascinating, for me.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah.*

Jan: How we deal with those boundaries: Where are they, and do they move, and how does the group manage those boundaries in community? Fascinating.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Very related to: How does a family function? Not just about individuality. There's going to be respect. There's going to be: How do we manage conflict? Where do I go with the group? What would I be actually lose of myself if I do?*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *Yeah.*

Jan: Yeah, and the possibility of repair, for those people that are fortunate enough that

in their family of origin, things went well there. People were heard and respected, and they had a way of working through conflict, and they felt loved, and held. That's amazing, right? Because then you grow up with that sense of having a way of regulating yourself, and grounding yourself, and hearing other people taking that in. But when we grow up in circumstances when that is all disrupted, and there's lots of trauma, then we have an opportunity in a new community to either repair that, or to continue the wounding.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: That's also really fascinating. Because, if we've been wounded a lot in our first community, the chances are we're going to see that happening in subsequent communities that we're involved in...

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah, yeah.*

Jan: Is there a leader in the community? How does the leader help with all of those issues? It's very interesting stuff.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah, yeah. Essentially: Going into any community, whether it is a one time group, or a much more intense longer-lasting one, we sign up for actually encountering those things that are likely to rub against the old wounds.*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *That what makes the community healing as opposed to re-traumatizing is the ability to actually have some support, have some space. That the challenges are not so high, so that it is possible to confront them and go beyond them. To digest it, instead of, once again, being proven that that's the way the world is.*

Jan: Yeah, instead of reenacting it.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: To be able to have, say, other members of the community to hold a space, so that we can get the right distance from what's going on there, and be able to work it through to the other side.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative), Noticing the phrasing, "the rest of the community forming a space…"*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *"…work it through to the other side": There is a physical quality in the words you use that illustrates that sense of trust. That it's the same thing that somebody says to you, "Trust that you can jump here," or "We're here to catch you, or…"*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *…In the trust exercise, falling backwards-*

Jan: Yes, yeah.

Serge: *People are there to catch you.*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *Essentially what we're talking about in that community is the creation of trust. And the process that we were talking about earlier, safety. Creating safety, assessing it, is how we can create that sense of trust in a way that's not a leap of faith. It's about calibrating how much we can trust people, so that we can then come to the place where we can rely on that trust.*

Jan: Yes. And I think some of what also helps in our community is that we do have a common way of mapping some of that journey out and talking about it. That we are able to go deep into the process in a bodily way. We're able to touch into the emotional part of that, and we also really welcome the cerebral part. Thinking about what is. I think that, if you can do all of those things, and the beauty of what I love about the Focusing world, is that we do all of those things. When you can understand something at all of those levels, and also if you have some kind of a framework, or a model, in which to understand that. A map… I love maps…

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: … then we can see where we are. For example, in a group where people get triggered by each other. Say, in our group, and it happens.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: We have a way of holding the space while people are very activated, and also being able to step back and ground physically in the body, and then also to be able to think at some point about what just happened there. Take that in and then listen inside, and really pause, and listen to each other. I think all of those things are really helpful.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Pausing and listening deeply and getting through, say a very, very challenging moment in a group, where people are really activated and triggered by each other.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative), and so you're talking about two things. One is the specific model, in this case, Focusing, and what it does, and how it helps. The other thing is that, in general, it seems like having a common roadmap, a common model, is going to make it more possible to have a community that confronts challenging situations. Because without it, there may be no basis on which to feel grounded in difficult moments, or it's more difficult.*

Jan: I think it's more difficult, yeah. If you have a shared commonality in an intentional community, there's a way of framing something and understanding it.

Serge: *Yeah.*

Jan: That usually helps people to regulate and calm down more.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: A sense of where to go. Like how are we going to manage this thing, because it feels chaotic, or flooding, or whatever that is?

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative), and so, in many different ways, there's a self-selectionof the people who go there, and so that helps. But how does this help us negotiate relationships with people who have a different belief system? In this case, we're talking about something that is neither political nor religious as a belief system, but some communities are also more oriented through the commonality of belief in religious or political outlook. But, in some way or another, we depend on a common model….*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *… to be a glue that helps us find grounding together. How do we then find a way to negotiate relationships with people who don't have that glue?*

Jan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), well, I think that's an important, really important. That's a life question. Right? A look at the world.

Serge: *Yeah.*

Jan: What's going on in the world? I think in a way, it's all a part of the same thing. It's like within the family of origin, there are going to be people that can be very different from each other. Gay people, straight people, queer people… Within a family, and within an intentional community, like in the Focusing community, there's lots of people that disagree about this or that, and how do we ... There's race issues, gender issues, how do we manage that in our community? Then taking that and managing it in the greater world, so I guess in some ways we would say that part of it in our community is about valuing the Focusing attitude. Right? That we come with curiosity, and we try to suspend judgment as much as possible, and to be curious about differences, and other. We have to do that within, it's easier sometimes to do that, when we share a lot of common reality, but it's the same mechanism, I think, when we don't.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative), so what I'm hearing you say, and which I feel very much in sync with, is the sense that, by being in a community that has this common set of values, but that does not shy away from conflict, we get a training in managing conflict and respecting difference…*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *… we become better able to negotiate conflict with people who might have a different set of values and a different road map.*

Jan: Yeah.

Serge: *Yeah.*

Jan: Easier said than done.

Serge: *Yes. I want to see, does this feel like a good place to end this or do you want to add something?*

Jan: No, I think that feels whole and complete in that little moment in time.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Jan: Yeah, yeah.

Serge: *Great. Thank you.*

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