

Long Essay Prompt

While contemporary society affords unprecedented conveniences, many also believe that it has many downsides. Impersonal bureaucracies and online services can feel cold or uncaring; semi-automated, repetitive work is mind-numbing and alienating. Feeling overlooked and useless, some turn inward, while others try to pass the time online.

Deep, authentic community is often held up as an antidote to such isolation. Soldiers, athletic teams, those struggling through natural disasters, or even a work group trying to deliver a big project under deadline often speak highly of a sense of comradery and common purpose. While not negating their hardship, such groups celebrate the sense of community and mutual support they experienced. For some, these are the moments that they felt most alive, acknowledged, and valued.

Describe a time where you felt a strong sense of community and belonging. What were the circumstances and how did you feel? What lessons can be learned from this experience that you believe could be applied more broadly in society to foster acceptance and counter feelings of alienation?

Man Ho Kwan

So-called home

As I ride the bus, seeing the happenings outside, I cannot help but think about this cruel cold society. I enjoy myself in this soothing eeriness of silence, but I am not alert to my surroundings. Yeah, that is why I ended up missing my stop. Never mind, the only task at hand is to drop by my aunt's house. I will take a walk instead.

I think about this society a lot. Particularly today, considering I am now passing through a ghetto. Many are constantly disparaging its existence but for me. If it is not my aunt, I will end up there as well.

Ever since I can remember, I have gone to her house to study for years. Deep down, I was not that grateful about this initially, since I had no spare time for playing, unlike other children. And I gradually became a rebel with a "cause" instead of studying tediously. Therefore, during my school years, I got into endless trouble because of my crazy rule-breaking behavior.

That had caused me to repeat a year, whether directly or indirectly. Yet, this is way more serious than expected, which left me at the bottom of hell. When I was a dud in my plights and being given up, I was gripped and overwhelmed by my aunt's outpouring of love.

That was when I truly felt a strong sense of community and belonging from this so-called home, and that was when I took a blood oath that I would never let her down again.

When asked about the lessons from this, I start to look at them very differently.

Bearing in mind that my aunt and I are not blood-related in our pedigree. Plus, she did not feel obliged to do so like a saint, she still nurtured me unconditionally. Therefore, I figured that this family is much more than biology. It is love that drove her, and this dedicating venerable spirit should be advocating colossally indeed.

As previously mentioned, the majority rejects, negates, and even hates weak people. Well, it has something to do with our pathetic capitalistic culture.

Never would I disregard people because of gaps in status or other factors, and so should everyone.

This culture is pernicious indeed, and that is why I hope everyone can apply that spirit more broadly, but not necessarily in an exact way. Maybe people can start with something small like donating, but the point is to have the determination to do so.

Frankly speaking, many benefits can be reaped because of that, such as fostering acceptance and countering feelings of alienation. In a word, this society will not be that aloof.

No wonder there is a saying: "The sense of belonging but not selfhood of love is such a truth for regulating this society."

After a 30 minutes' walk, I finally made it to the door.

And there she is, "You look hungry. I can make you something to eat."

I smirk and nod. "Sure, and thanks."

Nishkarsh Damai

I was born in Nepal and raised in a town near the Himalayas. The town is an eight-hour bus ride from the capital city Kathmandu. I would say that the times when I was in Nepal were some of the happiest that I have experienced in my life, as it was a place that made me feel like I was a part of a community.

Some of my fondest memories in Nepal were the weekends where adults from different families will gather in the kids' playground, picking up trash and fixing broken installations. It was a mutual understanding among adults that every Saturday morning is dedicated to cleaning playgrounds. I guess Nepal parents take "it takes a village to raise a child" quite literally - every adult feels responsible for others' children. Those are some of the happiest days of my upbringing.

My siblings and I moved to Hong Kong in 2015. I still recall the feeling I had, stuffed in a taxi from the airport with my siblings, that this place was so different from Nepal. It can be quite difficult to pinpoint how exactly it feels, but especially as an ethnic minority, alienation is a close enough word.

People in Hong Kong love individualism. Take McDonald's self-service kiosks as an example. People in Hong Kong care about efficiency so much that they genuinely enjoy doing it themselves, even if no one is lining up at the counter.

I believe that it is the conversations and interactions that connect people and build communities. With the increasing automation and repetitive jobs, tolls are taken on us. The recent "lying flat" movement that started in China, where otherwise perfectly able youngsters quit their jobs and stay in their beds, is perhaps a hint that people are not happy with how we live as urban dwellers and modern humans.

More can be said on how we make friends. As researchers of ancient tribes noted, we as humans are only capable of building true connections with around 150 other individuals. And yet, it is common that we have 1000+ friends online, the majority of whom we don't even know in real life. Is this an improvement, or is it a deterioration to how we build connections?

However, not all hope is lost. Although Hong Kong is now facing an unprecedented challenge, history teaches us that the worst times bring forth the best in people. From the book "Humankind", the author noted that during the bombings of London in WWII, the markets were bustling and people were more helpful than ever. The same can be said in Ukraine. We are shown the best of humanity among Ukrainians and beyond.

As I look back, Hong Kong might not be so different from Nepal after all. People in Hong Kong, just like Nepal, love the place which they call home. If we can take the initiative to show that we care about one another, maybe we can help the community to mend itself and move forward.

Pratikshha Limbu

A sense of belonging. A feeling that I seldom craved, nor held too much regard for. Born as a first-generation immigrant in Hong Kong, I was a manifestation of a conglomerate of identities – first and foremost, a Nepalese, albeit, illiterate in my mother tongue. Second, a Hong Konger, born and raised here, barely able to speak the local language. Third, an ethnic minority, and hence, a non-local, despite having known only Hong Kong as my home. Being part of many communities, yet belonging in none, I never knew truly what "a sense of belonging" meant. Why did people make such a fuss about community, anyway?

In the classroom, I was a competitor. After all, I was the lucky one – of all my cousins and kin back in Nepal, I was the one to break the glass ceiling. I had to make sure that I was worth this God-given opportunity that even my family envies. My classmates were friends, but so too were they rivals. I found myself cautious of their successes rather than proud, admittedly, silently rejoicing at their failures.

As adolescents, one of our strongest forms of community is our classroom – a society of its own, boasting its politics, factions, and culture. Despite having viewed my own such community as only competition for me to conquer to succeed, my resolve was bound to crack. Having attended a school with a majority of ethnic minorities, my fight was not unique. Here, everyone was climbing to shatter that glass ceiling, atop one another, if needed. I realised, I was not the only one with big aspirations and expectations to meet.

Being in the same classroom for years, I found myself mingling with my competitors on bases beyond grades. The more time I spent there, the more I saw. I saw the weight on their shoulders – their efforts, their passions, and their fears. I saw them as young individuals, each with pure, crystalline dreams and hopes such as my own.

I felt victimised by the system, in this dog-eat-dog society, and the need to be the best. My classmates whom I previously deemed stepping stones, became comrades on the battlefield. We were fighting this fight together, each with our own struggles. Indeed, we may have our own victories we count and compare, but in the grand picture, we are the youth, and only together, can we paint the future with our individual strokes and colours. This is belonging.

Belonging precedes national and ethnic identity; it surpasses blood and skin. I have always had a community – my family, my friends, my classmates, and more. Anyone and any group can be a community, but to belong, is one's own path to walk. Belonging can derive from shared interests and backgrounds, but beyond that, it is the ability to recognise and acknowledge each person as their own, and still walk together. To belong, we must find those who we wish to cross our paths with, and together, go greater distances.

Brian Ng

While contemporary society affords unprecedented conveniences, many also believe that it has many downsides. Impersonal bureaucracies and online services can feel cold or uncaring; semi-automated, repetitive work is mind-numbing and alienating. Feeling overlooked and useless, some turn inward, while others try to pass the time online.

Deep, authentic community is often held up as an antidote to such isolation. Soldiers, athletic teams, those struggling through natural disasters, or even a work group trying to deliver a big project under deadline often speak highly of a sense of comradeship and common purpose. While not negating their hardship, such groups celebrate the sense of community and mutual support they experienced. For some, these are the moments that they felt most alive, acknowledged, and valued. Describe a time where you felt a strong sense of community and belonging. What were the circumstances and how did you feel? What lessons can be learned from this experience that you believe could be applied more broadly in society to foster acceptance and counter feelings of alienation?

The human touch in communication brings about a sense of belonging and community, letting us feel accepted by others. It serves as a reminder that humans are capable of caring, sympathising and loving others, in a way that technology can never imitate.

My fondest memory of experiencing a strong sense of community and belonging dates back to my service experience last summer. I volunteered to be a student helper in the Form 1 Summer Bridging Programme at school, which aims to help incoming freshmen transition smoothly from primary to secondary school. Throughout the week, I held activities for the newcomers to interact with each other, lead them in ice-breaking activities in which I immersed myself in the joyous atmosphere.

The pandemic has deprived us of our most genuine ways of connection, and this experience was a stark contrast to the previous years. After each day of the programme, the Form 1 students would walk by my side and energetically say "Thank you, senior!". During the orienteering trips across the campus that I lead, they would excitedly bombard me with questions about my school life in the past years. Communicating with them was a pleasure as they couldn't hide their faces of surprise and astonishment, a huge contrast with their stern-looking profile pictures on WhatsApp or Instagram. The expression isn't just one-sided either. Throughout this service programme, I seamlessly blended into their conversations as if I am also one of them.

My biggest takeaway from this programme was recognizing the importance of real-life interaction. In these few years of lockdown, I have never doubted the power of technology. I subscribed to the idea that ZOOM and FaceTime could perfectly replicate real-life interactions. I trusted the notion that text messaging was just as good, if not better than, verbal communication. This experience proved me wrong. In the five days, I felt the importance of real life communication. There are frequent debates in society on whether online meetings should replace face-to-face interaction, owing to their convenience. Although we can all be "connected" with a few clicks of the mouse, face-to-face interaction is just irreplaceable, and it's the only way to foster kinship and belonging. ZOOM might save us time to travel to and from school, but it can never replace the youthful days of laughter students spend in classrooms. Skype might be a convenient, functional alternative to seeing our beloved friends, but it can never emulate the quality time of hugging each other and

watching movies together, basking in the propinquity human touch brings. After all, humans connect with hearts, not with WIFI, and thus the most direct way to tackle feelings of alienation is to never get used to this way of living. Zoom and Google Meet is a temporary substitution for activities under the pandemic, but humans should never allow it to take over as the norm.

The haunting fear of isolation is inevitable, but by looking after one another, we could definitely warm hearts with human authenticity and sincerity.