

"I seen the little lamp."

Communities are the heart, the soul, the nervous system, and the lifeblood of human society. Communities provide mutual support and love in times of celebration and crisis. People are infinitely more capable when they work together than when they work on their own.

New Community Networks: Wired for Change, Schuler

In Katherine Mansfield's story "The Doll's House," the Burnell girls are given an amazing doll's house and all the children in the school get their chance, two at a time, to visit the Burnell courtyard to see it. All but our Else and Lil Kelvey. "And the only two who stayed outside the ring were the two who were always outside, the little Kelveys...the Kelveys were shunned by everybody. Even the teacher had a special voice for them."

The Kelveys are poor. Their mother is a cleaning lady and their father is rumoured to be in jail. So they are ostracized. Their lack of a support system is both a cause and an effect of their poverty. Though belonging to a community is essential to human well being, they don't belong.

How big is our community? Who is let in? Who is kept out? Real estate developers lure us with the promise of an "exclusive community" and the term has come to have positive connotations. Are we persuaded that it's desirable to live in an exclusive community? Who do we want to exclude and why?

To my mind the people of Alberta are a community. In a democracy all the citizens of a particular political unit—such as a province—share the responsibility for the kind of society created in that place. Alberta citizens have a say in setting social policy, not only by the way we vote in elections, but by being informed about and discussing the issues, by writing letters to elected representatives and in every form of civic participation. As more responsibility devolves from the federal level to the provincial, more responsibility rests with each of us as Albertans.

In order to be a community we all do not have to think alike. Alberta can be an inclusive community of mutually respectful citizens who encourage real thought, thorough discussion and the open pursuit of truth. Whatever our private beliefs, as citizens we do not just tolerate the views of others but welcome diversity and a range of perspective. *AlbertaViews* is intended to be a vehicle for the expression of many points of view, not partisan but open to the truth, whatever the truth may turn out to be.

This issue of *AlbertaViews* provides many insights into community. Bob Ware, in the Eye on Alberta selection

"GM is Larger than Denmark," says we use the term community loosely but very rarely define what we mean by it—which might be anything from neighbourhood to interest group. He says there are "ethnic communities, professional communities, cultural communities, regional communities," but that we don't ordinarily use the term for larger political units. In "Longing to Belong" Rochelle Yamagishi tells how one can live in a place for four generations and still yearn to be fully part of the community. In "Poverty in the Midst of Plenty" Sabitri Ghosh shows the worst thing about being poor is being shut out of community, having no voice, no opportunity for social participation. When people are so poor that they lack the wherewithal to exercise their rights as citizens, democracy is weakened. In David Albahari's story "By the Light of the Silvery Moon," the immigrant Adam tells about the land he left behind: "Life turned into a department store where all manner of versions of the past were on display... Anyone, like me, who opted for passing through the store and going out the other side with no purchases in hand ended up, slowly but surely, alone." In that land the price paid to belong to community was social conformity. If one didn't buy in to the beliefs, assumptions and values of the community, one was isolated.

To be a community we don't have to be united in thought, but I do believe we have to be united in caring. We then become a community of spirit, of understanding. Now what is community of spirit?

When Isabel Burnell boasts about the dollhouse, its beds with the real bedclothes and the stove with the oven door, her sister Kezia reminds her of the lamp. "'Oh yes,' said Isabel, 'and there's a teeny little lamp....' 'The lamp's best of all,' cried Kezia. She thought Isabel wasn't making half enough of the little lamp." Later although she has been forbidden by her parents, Kezia impulsively invites Lil and our Else into the courtyard to see the dollhouse. The ragamuffin girls are almost immediately chased away. Burning with shame they hurry down the road. But when they stop to rest by the roadside our Else smiles her rare smile and says, "I seen the little lamp." In spite of the gulf in social status between our Else and Kezia, they belong to the same community, the community of spirit—because they love the same thing.

May we all, in this season, catch a glimpse of the little lamp.

