

# Community

[kə-'myü-nə-tē]

**Noun.** A unified body of individuals, such as people with common interests living in a particular area. Alternatively, a social state or condition.<sup>1</sup>

by Jamin Rowan (English, American Studies)

I have been co-teaching a course in the Honors Program for the past three years on the art of transformative storytelling. During the first few weeks of the course, students develop a personal story about the obstacles they have encountered in their efforts to address a personal need. Students perform their refined and well-crafted six-minute stories for each other about a month into the semester at a class StorySLAM event. As I listened last fall semester to students share stories about their desires for connection, self-confidence, and acceptance, and the obstacles that stood in their way of meeting their needs—eating disorders, sexual abuse, anxiety, abandonment, perfectionism, neurodivergence—I felt like I was participating in the creation of a sacred community. I felt a sense of connection to the students who shared their stories with me and each other that was deeper than the connection I typically feel with students in other courses. I have been reflecting since on what it was about the StorySLAM experience that had the power to establish such an emotionally and spiritually rich community.

In its most common usage, *community* describes a group of people who “live in the same place,” share the “same interests, pursuits, or occupation,” or are “distinguished by shared

circumstances of nationality, race, religion, sexuality, etc.”<sup>2</sup> *Community* is also often used, as Raymond Williams notes, to “distinguish the body of direct relationships” forged at the local level from the “more formal, more abstract and more instrumental” relationships that began to take shape in the “context of larger and more complex industrial societies.”<sup>3</sup>

These definitions capture something about the community that my students and I formed as we told and listened to each other’s stories. We shared a lot in common: place, interests, religion. And over the course of the first month of the semester, each student had established a direct relationship with nearly every one of their classmates. But our commonalities and personal interactions did not account for the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the community that we forged during the StorySLAM.

As I thought about what may have made this experience so meaningful, I remembered the revelation Joseph Smith received in 1843, in which he learned that the “same sociality which exists among us” on Earth “will exist among us” in eternity, “only it will be coupled with eternal glory.”<sup>4</sup> It is possible that, during the StorySLAM, we had momentarily accessed some of the “eternal glory” that will be added to our sociality in the eternities because of the degree of trust that each storyteller had to have in their listeners to be able to share such personal stories.

But I also want to suggest that the community that came together during our class StorySLAM had a lot to do with storytelling—that the act of sharing and listening to stories plays a vital role in community formation and the persistence of healthy communities. BYU is increasingly committed to creating a “community of belonging composed of students, faculty, and staff whose hearts are knit together in love.”<sup>5</sup> As people who are especially invested in reading, understanding, and crafting stories, humanists are uniquely positioned to build and sustain emotionally and spiritually enriching communities. ■



1. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “community (n.),” [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com).

2. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “community,” [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

3. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (Oxford University Press, 1985), 55.

4. Doctrine & Covenants 130:2.

5. “Statement on Belonging,” <https://belonging.byu.edu/statement-on-belonging>.