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### Book Reviews: The Fragile Community: Living Together with AIDS, Mara B. Adelman and Lawrence R. Frey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997

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REVIEWS

**Mara B. Adelman and Lawrence R. Frey.**

***The Fragile Community: Living Together with AIDS.***

Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997.

PAUL A. SOUKUP, S.J.

A student journalist doing a story on the service-learning program at Santa Clara University once asked me whether the University required faculty members to participate in service learning activities. The question made perfect sense: Since faculty assigned students to work in community placements as part of their learning, why shouldn't the faculty's teaching and research have similar roots in the local community?

Mara Adelman (Seattle University) and Lawrence Frey (Loyola University, Chicago) tell the story of precisely such an engagement in their study of communication and community at Bonaventure House, a residential facility in Chicago for people with AIDS. Drawing on theories of interpersonal communication and organizational communication, they ask how "communicative practices help create and sustain everyday communal life amidst the crises of human loss" (3). The two formed a team, with one (Adelman) inside the house and the other (Frey) outside, an arrangement that provided a dual-perspective approach to the research. In addition to the methods of participant observation, the two also employed extensive interviewing with residents and staff, a procedure that both gives the facility's residents a voice in the research and helps the reader to reconstruct much of the experience. Not the usual ethnographic study, this book attempts to answer significant questions about community, communication, marginalized groups, and research.

Community, with its shifting definitions and practices, has long puzzled researchers. Adelman and Frey provide a useful summary of that research from various disciplinary

perspectives. They then argue, first from theory and then from the practices they observed, that communication practices generate community. Throughout the study, they show how communication forms the glue that establishes both the climate and the community of Bonaventure House. The research narrative indicates some of the usual divisions of organizational communication study (entry, socialization) but goes beyond these to characterize everyday life through portraits of individual members and accounts of day-to-day activities, ranging from doing the dishes to planning parties. The study also includes a sensitive look at how this organization must deal with the loss of its members through death. In this definitive experience members deal with depression, hope, and bereavement through particular communication practices.

The study highlights a contemporary marginalized group, pushed to the edges of American society not only through illness but also in the very make-up of its members: some homeless, some drug-dependent, some gay, all with AIDS. Most organizational communication study stays safely within the bounds of corporate or academic culture; this study contributes a look at a much deeper experience of community, not only among those who share an illness but also among their caregivers and community volunteers. Looking at the margins allows the reader better to understand the limits we place and how those limits artificially divide our own attention and interactions. Our uncertainties about community may result from our own exclusionary practices.

For Jesuit schools, *The Fragile Community* provides a fine example of community-based research and suggests a path to a deeper integration of key themes in our mission statements: educating the whole person, community responsibility, justice, a commitment to recognizing and preserving human dignity, and to engaging the world with compassion.

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