

Cloudy skies over the Halifax Commons.

PHOTOS: Simon Ryder-Burbidge



Community hike near Peggy's Cove.



Morality and the Loss of the Village

by LIS LANDRY /// EAC Staff

When I lived in Montreal, I would meet up with my friend Katie once or twice a month for a drink. She was finishing her PhD in nursing and I was, much less virtuously, completing a masters of analytic philosophy. We'd meet in dimly lit bars and talk about medical ethics, politics, our climate grief and all the other petty and precious things that clutter ordinary life. Sometimes it was only Katie and me. Other times, a blithe crowd would gather around us. In my fondest memories of that city, I am sunk into a vinyl booth, warm with drink, listening to their chatter like a song. I never really found my place in Montreal, but I feel that I brushed up against it in those moments.

Unfortunately, it didn't last. By the time I finished my degree, we all scarcely saw each other. When we did pull a group together, most of our time was spent catching up on each other's lives instead of being a part of them. Katie remains a dear friend, but the space between our meetings grew and grew. Soon after, I left Montreal, heavy with the weight of my own loneliness.

This is a familiar feeling for many in my generation. In 1986, nearly half of Canadians reported seeing their friends daily. Now, it's about one in five.¹ Our informal ties are weaker too; we see less of our neighbours, coworkers, baristas and bankers. Many of my friends are becoming parents today with little support from their communities. Everywhere I look, I see people suffering from the loss of "the village".

Clearly, isolation hurts us. But as an EACer, I'm also concerned that it undermines our ability to take collective action. We're facing some serious, compounding problems in the world right now, like climate change, inequity and avarice. It's tempting for me to merely blame the powerful people that let these problems happen, but I know that we will not heal this wound by simply deploring the knife that caused it. Instead, we must work together to protect each other and mend the world. To do this, I think we need to find our village.

How do you build a village?

I found myself turning to a philosophical framework called the ethics of care while searching for an answer to this question. It's an approach to ethics that was developed by feminist thinkers in the late 20th century as a critique of how Western philosophy tends to imagine morality.

Western moral theory has long been shaped by the ideals of liberal individualism, the belief that society is made up of independent, self-governing individuals motivated by reason and self-interest. According to this view, the individual exists before the group; relationships and cooperation are secondary, formed only when they serve self-interested goals. Morality, then, is about setting rules for how these separate individuals can treat one another justly, and a "good person" is one who rises above their personal ties and emotions to apply universal, impartial principles.

This moral individualism gives us a tidy view of moral life, but it's got some big problems. For one, it tends to embed misogyny into moral thought. By overemphasizing dispassionate rationality, moral individualism treats virtues often associated with femininity (like care, empathy and interdependence) as private concerns rather than moral achievements. It can even portray women as inherently morally defective, since we have historically been seen as "less rational" than men.

It also rests on a false assumption. Moral individualism depends on the idea that humans spring into existence with their identities essentially fully formed, requiring no nurturing from (or co-creation with) those around them. Not so. Every autonomous adult was once a dependent child, and we all remain dependent on each other in various ways throughout life. Our capacity for rational action was taught to us and protected by others. Crucially, we would not have any "self-interest" to pursue if it were not for our caregivers, who took a shared interest in our well-being. As care ethicist Virginia Held writes, it can be useful to imagine ourselves as liberal individuals in some contexts but "we should not lose sight of ... the need for caring relations to undergird or surround such constructions".² A complete moral philosophy must have room for care just as well as autonomy to address "both the more immediate and the more distant human relations [required] to develop morally acceptable societies".³

Imagine visiting a grieving friend whose apartment has fallen into disarray. Are you morally obliged to help clean it? Most individualist theories would say no: the act is permissible, even admirable, but not required. They hold that you owe your friend no more than a stranger in the same position. Care ethics resists this framing, rejecting the idea that moral life consists of isolated duties between independent agents. Your friend's grief, and your awareness of it, are part of an ongoing relationship; they are facts that have moral relevance in themselves. The real question, then, is not "do I have an obligation to help?" but "what would a caring and attentive response look like in this context?"

So, care ethicists and village-builders share a common adversary: an individualism that erodes the sense of mutual responsibility needed for community. Perhaps, we can answer our village-building question by deploying an ethics of care.

Three ways to build a village, according to the ethics of care

① IMAGINE CARE AS BOTH A VALUE AND A PRACTICE

Someone who values care makes a standing commitment to the importance of caring relations. This makes relationships morally salient and creates attentiveness to the needs within them. That attentiveness, in turn, motivates a practice of care: the competent, proportional ways the carer responds. As village-builders, we might begin by recognizing care as one of our values and committing to the moral importance of a caring community. We can ask: In what ways does my village need me? How can I respond to that need with caring practice?

② LET GO OF TRANSACTIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Liberal individualism says humans act mainly to pursue personal desires. Since achieving these goals often requires collaboration, people must bargain: if you help me, I'll owe you. This creates a transactional expectation in our relationships and implies that those who need more help owe more debt. Care ethics rejects this by seeing caring cooperation as a natural part of interacting as interdependent beings. The next step, then, is to trade transactional expectations for shared interests: when I care for you, I take on your interests as my own, without debt.

③ BECOME A VILLAGER

Community is socially constructed; it exists through how we act and relate. If our communities no longer feel like villages, we should change how we construct them. As Virginia Held observes, when people accept individualism as human nature, they behave as if it were true. This connection between belief and behaviour gives us an important tool: if we accept interconnection and interdependence as part of who we are, we'll be better positioned to make those needed changes.

To become villagers, we must believe in the village.

REFERENCES

1. Chuck Chiang, "Canadians spending less time with friends, especially those of working age: StatCan", The Canadian Press, June 17, 2025.
2. Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 43.
3. Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 44.

Lis (she/her) is a recovering analytic philosopher who works on the EAC's fundraising team.