



Tempest in a teacup: pandemic resilience in a Canadian small town

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Abstract

The present essay describes how one small, rural, Canadian town relied on its community spirit to support locals affected by the current pandemic. Such spirit might increasingly attract people, now working from home in large cities, who seek a sense of community beyond what work offers. The attraction could bring new life to small towns.

Keywords Community · Pandemic · Resilience · Small towns

I became an emeritus professor of social psychology in 2010. To prepare for my dead-wood role, I moved 50 km west from the big city of Ottawa, population one-million, to the small town of Almonte, population six-thousand. The town, intriguingly named after a Mexican general, was established in the mid-1800s in support of textile mills powered by four local waterfalls. James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, grew up here.

By big-city standards, Almonte is an ordinary small town — one of hundreds of quaint and quiet settlements punctuating the Canadian rural landscape of rocks, trees and water. Almonte has five churches, four traffic signals, three gas stations, two animal clinics, one supermarket, and no parking metres. The mayor was raised on a dairy farm. The textile mills are now condos and restaurants, and most new residents are either seniors or start-up families. Nineteenth century, red brick and grey stone buildings preserve the look of downtown Almonte's slightly-faded glory, as do the town potholes and a large sign on the side of a local art gallery that reads, "Black Watch chewing tobacco, a man's chew."

Yet, although the town of Almonte might be ordinary, the community of Almonte is certainly not. Here old-fashioned norms of mutual respect, cooperation, civility and civic engagement prevail. People know their neighbours, walk to town to get their mail, and say hello to everyone they encounter, including

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those with opposing political views. The busiest store in town sells donated clothing, housewares and furniture, and donates all revenues to worthy local projects and people in need. The community teems with volunteers and wallows in social capital. Volunteers publish our online newspaper, organize our folk, Celtic and chamber music festivals, run literacy programmes, public lectures, book clubs, art exhibits and a men's shed. When pronounced with a local accent, Almonte is a "Git 'er done" town.

Alas, such community spirit did not prevent Almonte from suffering its own pandemic tragedies. The worst occurred during April and May 2020 when Covid-19 found its way into Country Haven, an 82-bed, long-term care facility in town. The offending virus caused the death of least 25 of its residents and staff — a grim record at the time, making national news headlines.

Most of those who died at Country Haven were from local families. Almost everyone in Almonte knew at least one of the deceased, and was horrified by the event. There was as much sympathy for staff as for the residents. Many obituaries of residents who died, for example, expressed gratitude for the care the staff provided. Spontaneous appeals for funds to support Country Haven survivors raised over \$20,000. Locals offered flowers and sewed masks. A local restaurant offered meals. A local 6 year old boy, who sold hand-made macramé keychains in hopes of raising \$50 for the Country Haven cause, raised over six times his goal.

A deluge of stories of good deeds and gratitude soon began to appear in our local newspaper, encouraging even more. Most people in Almonte know local shop owners by name — Don the butcher, Baker Bob, and several others. Government restrictions on social distancing led some of the shop owners to launch street pick-up or home delivery services, allowing their local, loyal customers to continue their patronage. One inventive coffee shop owner even devised a quintessentially Canadian scheme to allow credit-card payments for drive-through purchases by bridging the two-metre owner-driver gap with his credit card machine taped to the end of a hockey stick!

Other shop owners have been forced to hibernate, hoping for a rapid reversal of restrictions before going broke. Most of these owners provided one-on-one services such as haircuts and eye tests that cannot be duplicated virtually. Their plight has prompted a growing number of Almonte residents to "pay forward" — demonstrating their customer loyalty and trust by offering the equivalent a no-interest, loan, repaid with future services in order to keep the businesses afloat.

Perhaps the most elaborate local goodwill gesture has been the creation of Almonte's free, food-pickup and delivery service for local clients: senior and disabled residents. Many of these clients, especially those living in rural areas surrounding town, have been locked down in their homes with minimal social contact during the pandemic, unable or frightened to visit the local grocery store for food and household supplies. Recognizing the problem, a local social service agency recruited volunteers to take clients' shopping list orders and credit card numbers over the phone, more volunteers to serve as proxy shoppers for the clients, and still more volunteers to deliver the purchases to the clients' front doors. The project has been wildly successful, currently delivering to about 200 clients who often receive their groceries the same day as ordered. The clients are happy

and grateful for the service. The volunteers feel appreciated and gratified. Everyone enjoys the friendly social contact on the phone from the porch.

In short, during this time of crisis, Almonte has demonstrated the good that a small town with a strong tradition of community support can do. There are, of course, counter examples. Some small towns are reported to have become mean-spirited or helpless in response to the pandemic, while some big cities, or at least small communities therein, have organized mutual aid similar Almonte's. Yet Almonte's altruistic anecdotes serve as a reminder of the benefits of a small, supportive community and as an argument for cultivating community involvement.

Which leads me to wonder. We live in an era of migration from small towns to big cities. If current trends continue, small towns will continue to disappear. Will small-town traditions of community disappear as well? The sad answer may be yes. Size matters, as does the strength of weak but resilient ties on which community spirit is built. In a town of six-thousand, rich in community traditions of helping others, a good deed can be organized by three friends in a day. In a city of one-million, the same good deed is likely to require application forms, written proposals, committee meetings, feasibility studies, legal advice, and funding projections just for a chance of approval. The flexibility, spontaneity and human face of community support often smother under such requirements.

Yet the demise of small-town communities is not inevitable. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic might help restore them. Why? The two-metre, social-distancing rule for reducing virus transmission has stimulated a vast natural experiment in using the internet as a medium for work-related communication. The experiment has been sufficiently successful that many businesses such as Twitter in San Francisco and Shopify in Ottawa are adopting the medium as a substitute for face-to-face interaction. This reduces the need for centralized office space in big cities. Employees are thus freed to work remotely, at home or elsewhere, obviating the time, cost and hassle of daily commutes and rigid work schedules. And where might that home or elsewhere be? Perhaps in a small town with a supportive community.

Conclusion

Of course, many conditions must be met before a reverse migration occurs. Leaving a big city for small-town life is not for everyone and, even for converts, big-city obligations are likely to dominate their small-town desires. In addition, there is no guarantee that emigrants from big cities will adopt small community ways; indeed, there are dangers that the reverse will occur. Even so, the ironic thought that a life-threatening pandemic might inadvertently contribute to the preservation of a small-town way of life captivates me. As Howard Lovecraft remarked, "From even the greatest of horrors irony is seldom absent."

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