



Peter Ralston

# Communities

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Heaven and hell, so the parable goes, are remarkably similar. Newly departed souls, given only a long-handled spoon, find themselves crowding around a great table in the middle of which is a steaming pot of soup. The spoons work well enough for reaching the pot, but it's impossible to actually maneuver the soup to one's mouth before it spills to the floor. There is, of course, one significant difference between the two final destinations: While the souls Down Below are howling with frustration and battling their fellow diners, those around the table Up Above are using the long spoons to feed each other, and no one is going hungry.

What does this metaphor for interdependence tell us about Maine's 15 year-round island communities? Ask most islanders if they can imagine living anywhere else, and they'll emphatically shake their heads, no. It's not just the islands' rugged beauty or the natural resource-based way of life, they insist. It's also the sense of belonging to a community where people take care of each other.

Islanders' strong commitment to civic engagement and volunteerism has, in fact, created something of a "heaven on earth" on the small, far-flung islands that make up Maine's archipelago. And, while most residents may be reluctant to tell you how many volunteer roles they fill in their community, the odds are good that they wear several hats. Perhaps it's the knowledge that, surrounded by water, they have no one to turn to for help but each other. Maybe it's just a magnified version of small towns everywhere. The truth is that most year-round islanders do much more than just make a living; they make living on their particular island better for everyone.

There's certainly no lack of unpaid jobs in island communities. The web of nonprofit organizations is tightly strung and can be difficult to elude, especially when the opportunities are so plentiful. You can serve on a town governing board, volunteer in the library, or get involved in one of the churches. You can help out in the community center, the school, or at the local history museum—visit the elderly, read to the

young, or practice fire and ambulance drills. The list is enormous, and with so much demand for assistance and such a short supply of people to meet the need, you could hardly blame a person for opting out. Why not just stay home, enjoy the stunning scenery, and leave it up to everybody else to run things?

What's astonishing is that so many island residents choose engagement over indifference, service over self-interest. Even after a long day of hauling traps, herding kindergartners or standing at a cash register, islanders show up to participate in community life. They come out in droves to town meetings, elections, school performances and benefit dinners, pitching in whenever, wherever and however they're needed most.

Alden Robinson, the 2006–2008 Louis B. Cabot Fellow on Long Island in Casco Bay, captured this strong, inclusive spirit of community in writing about his experience:

*What's important, and what's so inspiring about the community on Long Island, is that all the opinions and rivalries and past conflicts can evaporate at a moment's*

*notice when necessary. Lifelong antagonists can cooperate flawlessly on a rescue call. The guy who holds a grudge against the planning board can also go out of his way to help the town when it needs to store equipment on his land. Newcomers can work shoulder to shoulder with lifetime islanders on the affordable housing committee, even though they might both be competing for the same piece of land in the future. It's a cliché to say it, but that really is the magic of an island community.*

While volunteer requirements may vary from one island community to the next and from one nonprofit to another, all that's really required is a sincere willingness to roll up your sleeves and tackle the job at hand. It doesn't matter much whether you're in high school or newly retired, a descendant of original settlers or a recent arrival "from away," a graduate of the School of Hard Knocks or a PhD. When leaders emerge, as they inevitably do, it's due to the power of their own commitment, not because they have any formal status or title. Everyone simply knows who they are.