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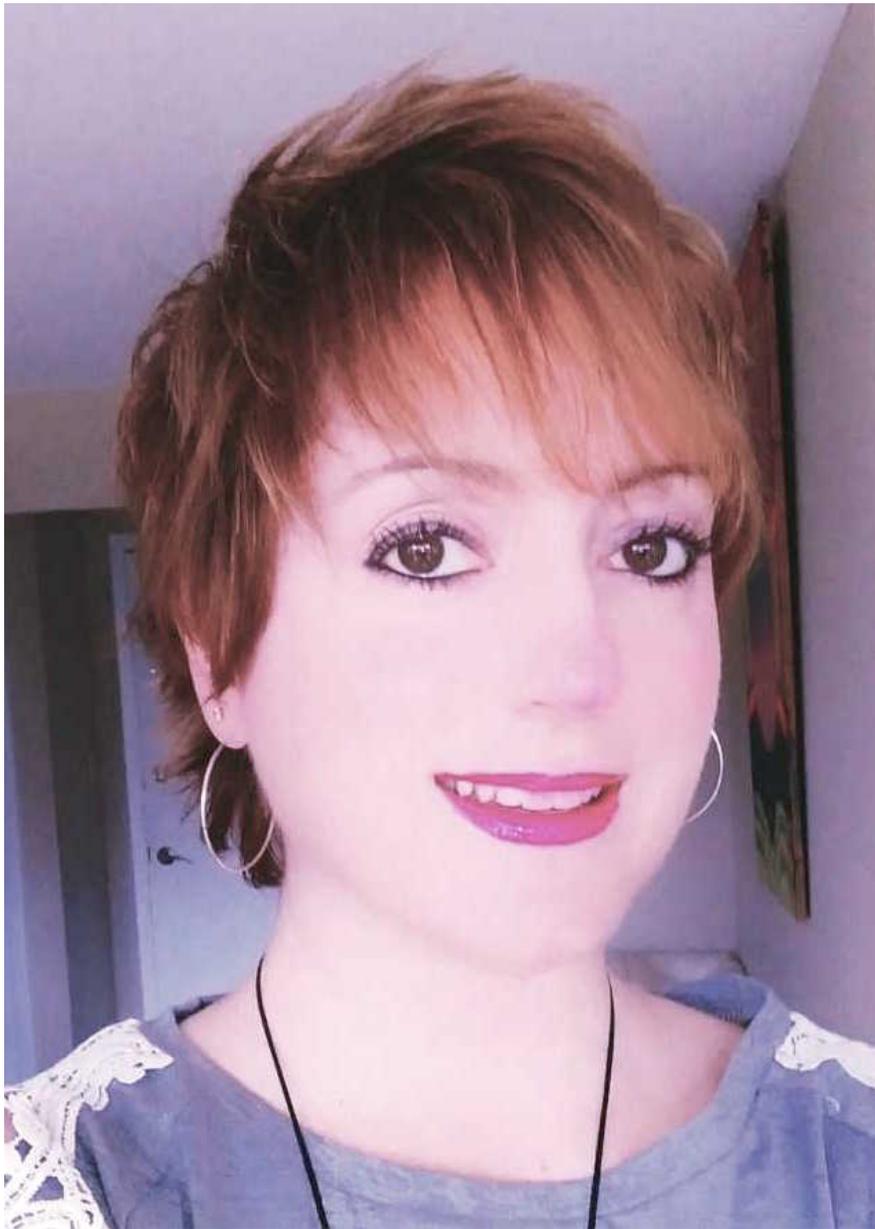
Understanding the importance of community in our lives: Kerry Tobin (Opinion)

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Updated on June 11, 2017 at 12:16 PM
Posted on June 11, 2017 at 12:15 PM

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BY GUEST COLUMNIST/CLEVELAND.COM



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Guest columnist Kerry Tobin serves as an assistant professor of philosophy at Cuyahoga Community College's Western Campus in Parma. Her studies and work have taken her overseas to Austria, England, Ireland and Italy to broaden her worldview. A native of New York City, she is constantly searching for the perfect bagel and slice of pizza.

A new world opened up for me after buying my first home. I became a member of a community -- a new club with its own rules, customs and codes. The new expectations intrigued me. How do I receive my neighbors and how will they accept me? What is a *community*, anyway?

To better appreciate what it entails to be part of a community, I took out my philosophical lens. Looking at an idea philosophically means to define it, question it and analyze it. The word *community* dates back to the late 14th century. It stems from the Old French word *comunité* (meaning commonness, everybody) and the Latin word *communitatem* (meaning union, common ownership, fellowship).

My quest to discover the nature of community led me to the works of Edith Stein, also known as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. The German Jewish philosopher converted to Roman Catholicism and became a Discalced Carmelite nun. She wrote a lot on the subject of philosophy and community. Her ideas fascinate me, especially in the current climate of political discord. She believed we are all in the same club and seek the same thing -- peace and a sense of fellowship. Accepting others defined the makeup of an individual to Stein. I found hope in her ideas.

Whether it is the family unit, circle of friends or the ethnic group in which we are a member, alliance and accord define community. We develop an allegiance to the crowd and it activates our compassion for our fellow members. Being an individual means being in a community with others. They are the same for Stein and not mutually exclusive. Individuals are empowered by their membership and it gives meaning to their lives.

It is an enormous responsibility to be a new member of any club. You must adopt your role and perform your job to the best of your ability. You must surrender yourself to your new demands and develop your role.

The existential philosopher Jean Paul Sartre believed we are only aware of ourselves fully in relation to others. Being in a community awakens you to your own sense of humanity and creates a deeper understanding of what it means to be a person. Life is others. We *need* others to better understand ourselves.

Being members of the human race connects us all. That is our bond, our group. It unites us.

Understanding our obligations to that larger community, to the human race, is part of our development as an individual. It is only then that we fully appreciate our role in humanity, the greatest *community* of all.

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