Community is deeply important for your physical and mental well-being. Depending on the community, it can also be really, really good for your career. In my own life and career, the most important community is the American Society of Journalists and Authors, a group of about a thousand freelance nonfiction writers who are spread out all over the United States and even in other countries yet manage to work together on projects and have both friendships and business relationships that span geographies and decades.

I’ll never forget the first time I walked into the ballroom at a members-only ASJA meeting. There were hundreds of people in the room, and in some way they all reminded me of me. They were all smart and articulate. They weren’t shy about jumping in and talking to new people, and by that time neither was I — it’s what self-employed entrepreneurs have to do. Most of them didn’t look especially athletic (I wasn’t either), and most were somewhat frumpily dressed in baggy jackets and comfortable shoes of the sort that I was wearing too. “I’ve found my tribe,” I thought. It was a feeling I’d never had before.

I’d have been very surprised if someone had told me that day that, in time, I would join the board of ASJA, serving there for sixteen years, and that I would eventually become president of the whole group. Or that nearly every good thing to happen in my career from that time on would come about either directly or indirectly through ASJA. But that’s what happened, mainly because ASJA members are incredibly generous about sharing both contacts and inside information and helping each other succeed.

It didn’t really hit me until I started writing this chapter, but in its own non-Okinawan way, ASJA functions like a moai. Even though we all work in a very challenging industry where too many writers are chasing too few decently paying jobs, we share work opportunities with each other for the common good. ASJA members volunteer hundreds of hours putting on our conferences, serving on our committees or on our board, and doing mundane things like handing out conference badges and stuffing tote bags. We even have an emergency fund, which many of us contribute to, that provides small bailout grants to professional writers who’ve fallen on hard times.

As much as I love ASJA, I know it’s not unique. In every profession and every industry, in every geographic region, and often within companies, groups like this exist where people help each other solve problems, find better jobs, and provide each other with advice and moral support. It could be a trade group, a union, a professional association, or an alumni group. It could be organized around a shared ethnic background or sexual identity or religious affiliation. Groups for common interest exist everywhere in many different forms, and I absolutely guarantee there’s at least one out there for you. It’s well worth making the effort to find it.
The Value of Community

I spend a lot of time thinking about how to form a group or find a tribe because of the roles that solitude and isolation — and community and connection — have played in my own life. My parents were both immigrants, and although each had a large extended family, those families lived thousands of miles away. I grew up in a Manhattan apartment building where we didn’t have any kind of neighborhood community. My father was Jewish, and my mother was raised Catholic, but there was no religious community in our lives either. You can see why joining ASJA, more than a decade later, felt like such a revelation.

Five years ago, my husband Bill and I decided to move all the way across the country from Woodstock to Snohomish, Washington. There were several reasons for this move, but community was one of the biggest. Snohomish was the central gathering point for a happy, jumbled, informal collective of more than a hundred professional and semiprofessional musicians who gathered several nights a week to play music, talk, hang out, and — this being the Pacific Northwest — drink craft beer. It was like some combination of a giant club, an extended family, and an extra-large band. Bill, an accomplished songwriter and guitarist, fit right in. Pretty soon we were spending most of our free evenings with this group, at open mics, performances, parties, and recording sessions. I remember more than once looking around at all these people, many of whom had become dear friends, and thinking that hanging out among them was much like being in a warm and wonderful bath.

Then came the summer of 2016. The farmhouse we’d rented since we first arrived in Snohomish was put up for sale, along with its land, at an exorbitant price only a developer could pay. We bought a more modestly priced house a bit farther out of town and prepared to move. At the same time, Bill’s closest friend, whom he had known for more than thirty years, was dying of cancer, so we were spending most of our time in the hospital with him. Then I came down with a raging gum infection. I was told I needed surgery that would put me more or less out of commission for three days. I sensibly decided to delay this until after moving day, but that plan proved unworkable because soon my mouth hurt so much that I couldn’t think clearly enough to do much of anything. Meanwhile we already owned the new house, along with its mortgage payments, and our rental was rapidly coming to an end.

“I don’t know what to do,” I told Bill. “If I have the surgery now, we’ll never be able to move in time.”

“We have friends,” Bill said, and he put out a call for help. And so it was that a few days later, as I lay on a sofa recuperating, a group of people came over, put all of our things in boxes, piled them into pickup trucks and vans, and drove them to our new home. Once I’d recovered, we threw the mother of all parties to thank everyone. Being part of a community can serve you in so many ways, some of which you may never have expected.

If you follow only one piece of advice in this book, please let it be this. You need community to support you in both your career and your life. That need is literally encoded in your DNA.

If you’re already part of a community of like-minded professionals who help sustain and encourage you, then great! You’re probably a lot better off than you would be without them. But if you’re not, do what you have to do to find a community that can nurture you and your ambitions for the future. Online
communities are great, but ones that meet face-to-face, or at least by video chat, are better. You may not gel with the first one you try, or the second, but please don’t give up. Keep trying until you discover or create a group that’s the right fit. There’s a moai out there for you. You just have to find it.

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**Minda Zetlin** is the author of *Career Self-Care: Find Your Happiness, Success, and Fulfillment at Work*. Her articles, books, and workshops offer research-backed advice to help people get the most out of their careers and their lives.