

Creating the Conditions for Vibrant Citizenship to Emerge a Story of Interest

Image



Over the last five or so years Axiom News has been able to interview many people on the broad topic of creating the conditions for people to live out vibrant citizenship in their local communities.

We like author Peter Block's definition of a citizen: One who is willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole.

We also like the word vibrant, which is defined as pulsating with life, vigour or activity. Synonyms include active, dynamic, vital and vivid.

Reflecting on our many conversations now, we notice that, despite the diversity of contexts, one multi-pronged theme glows bright: People are recognizing that a sense of kindred connection is the precursor to citizenship that is most alive and generative – and they’re on a discovery journey to come up with new ways of gathering that gives rise to that kindred spirit.

Delburne, Alberta

It was Nora Smith who first shared with us the notion of extraordinary connections.

Nora hails from Delburne, a tiny Alberta hamlet of about 800, where, thanks in large part to her work as a community worker, grassroots efforts are underway to proactively strengthen the community’s resilience.

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In Delburne, a massive, main-street photo display of local community members sparked gestures of appreciation and connection between people.

Nora has been working over the last year or so to support her community in actualizing some of the priorities community members identified as most important to their village’s future thriving, including health and wellness and main street revitalization.

With limited funding, Nora and a practicum student Red Deer College’s social work program, LeeAnne Shinski, have been organizing and hosting community gatherings with the intent to see citizen-led collaborative activities related to these priorities emerge.

Through an Appreciative Inquiry process designed to discover the underpinnings of remarkable collaboration, Nora says she was struck by the profound realization that the best and most effective collaboration starts with extraordinary relationships between people. In other words, it’s not enough to just bring people together, identify a shared goal and get to work. It’s the calibre of the connections between people that is the precursor for all of the “wonderful, tangible achievements at the

other end,” Nora says.

So now the path Nora and LeeAnne are actively on is discovering how to gather people in such a way that such extraordinary connections are birthed.

They’re experimenting with a few different tools and processes, keeping the Appreciative Inquiry approach, which Nora says she’s utterly convinced is foundational to creating social change, as the core. Part of their exploration includes the question of sustainability — how do you create processes that build deep inclusion — and are sustainable?

Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Our connection to the mid-sized city of Cedar Rapids, Iowa was sparked through an introduction to the leader of a local media organization with a likeminded thirst for contributing to the shaping of a possibility-oriented community story in new ways.

Like a number of other North American cities in recent years, Cedar Rapids has a community crisis in its not-so-distant past — a 2008 flood — that emerged as a beautiful testament to its capacity, gifts and the willingness of people to trust and to give with no expectation of return.

Since that time, a handful of community members having been asking a version of the question, how do we create opportunities to be thoughtful about what we’re creating as a community – without another disastrous event forcing us into that space?

Leslie Wright, vice-president of community building for the United Way of East Central Iowa, is one of those asking that question.

Like Nora, she’s become convinced that the answer boils down to trust and relationship and person-to-person dialogue, conversation and exploration, “being willing to believe that diversity in fact is part of the solution,” Leslie says.

“So part of it is about a more contemplative and even personal journey for folks.

“The challenge for us is how do we invite people into that exploration because there is no one answer, there is no brass bell for us to ring when we get to the end. It’s as much about the process.”

Leslie shares a vision of creating “ecosystems” of dialogue and exploration, intended to deepen trust and relationship and allow people to express themselves and use their gifts. “I almost see it as this going out and coming back — the energy that gets created with people coming back to the hub of things and opening up out again from the center into their own networks, into their own threads. But there is a shared sense of connectedness.”

Pulooro, Thailand

Rituu B. Naanda of the Constellation, a network of community facilitators located mostly in Africa and Asia, first reached out to us, sensing a kindred spirit in our writings about community. Rituu and her colleagues, including Constellation pioneer Jean-Louis Lamboray, have a profound commitment to appreciating the strengths of a community as the path to that community’s thriving.

Though their context tends to be very different — they work with communities grappling with issues such as grinding poverty, cholera and AIDS epidemics — they touch on the same theme of nourishing relationships between community members as essential to enabling change.

In a book published in French and Spanish on his experiences, Jean-Louis shares many stories demonstrating how the communities he and his colleagues have worked with are realizing new possibilities, as community members are invited and supported to work together to discover their collective strengths and then direct those towards realizing a shared community dream.

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Constellation members gathered in Barcelona, Spain last spring took time to appreciate each other’s strengths. Photo credit: Jan Somers.

The isolated village of Pulooro, in Thailand, is one example. Formerly oppressed by a corrupt village chief, the community is living into new possibilities after a couple of community workers invited the villagers to share their dreams for themselves and

their community.

“There is hope, tangible within and around us,” Jean-Louis writes.

“We don’t have to wait for a political or a religious redeemer who will save us from disaster. We can awaken and release our energy for change and transmit it to others, so that they in turn, can regain the confidence to act towards recreating a better society.

“How might this happen? Simply by changing our outlook! ... We can decide to tell persons close to us what we appreciate in them.”

Recognizing that this seemingly simple call in fact requires commitment, discipline and support to sustain, the Constellation has created a set of practices for communities to act on this basic intention to appreciate one another’s strengths. The practices are called community life competence and more about them can be learned [here](#).

Our Story

And now after years of telling other communities’ stories, this spring Axiom News set out on the both anxiety provoking and exhilarating path of contributing in a new way to the shaping of our own community story.

Bringing home what we’ve learned from other places, we’ve launched what we’re calling the Peterborough Dialogues — essentially a gift-based way of looking at our community, for the purpose of creating the space for citizens to manifest their own community-building intentions. Our tools and processes include both dialogue and media-making. And while we have so much to learn, we’re thrilled by the sense of possibility stirring within us and that seems to be alive in those who’ve joined us on this pioneering venture.

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*A graphic of the Peterborough
Dialogue possibilities. Artist:
Yvonne Hollandy*

“Peterborough Dialogues holds for me an enticing opportunity,” writes a citizen, Allan Reeves. “To find kinship among citizens, co-workers, and neighbours. To find, within a carefully crafted container, an invitation to play, to create, to be our best most vulnerable selves.”

How do we create the space that generates and blooms the kinds of extraordinary relationships that in turn enables us to build the kind of future we want to live into? Is that the question to ask — and keep asking?

Axiom News will be delving further into this topic over the next 10 weeks. If any of this resonates, we’d love to hear your insights and stories and weave them into this coverage as well. Feel free to email [michelle\(at\)axiomnews.com](mailto:michelle(at)axiomnews.com), Facebook [AxiomNews](#) or Tweet using the hashtag [#vibrantcitizenship](#).