

[Community: The Structure of Belonging \(Part 2 of 3: Why Now\)](#)



Community: The Structure of Belonging (Part 2 of 3: Why Now)

Thursday, August 9, 2018 -- Peter Block

Curator's Note: *Peter Block's book, Community: The Structure of Belonging has for years and many reasons been a constant guide in the work of Axiom News. Peter is one of, if not the, greatest question askers of our time. The six conversations and the provocative questions Peter poses within them have been the standard against which we evaluate each question we invite those whose stories we share to consider. The Peterborough Dialogues, which we launched in 2015 with terrific community outcomes in our hometown, rested on Community for its first principles and practices. In Community we have had both a philosophical treatise and a*

practical road map.

Peter has published a second edition of that important book and has shared his thoughts as to why in this blog series, originally published on AbundantCommunity.com. He notes that even though there is growing recognition amongst citizens and institutions of the need for deepening community, the practices by which it is attempted still often do harm and miss important nuances. Peter's analysis can and does show us how we can do better. We know what he recommends works. We know as well, that it is easy to make missteps.

Peter brings clarity where it is most needed, in Community. We share his original blog serialized in the hope to slow our readers down, to offer the space in between postings to sit with his words and wisdom before so quickly moving on.

As we continue our own work to [Reimagine Democracy](#), the timing of this second edition is, for us, delightfully serendipitous.

To read Part 1 of Peter's write-up, click [here](#). To read Part 3, click [here](#).

Steve Piersanti, my friend and publisher, called to suggest we put out another edition of this book. These invitations always make me nervous. I get nervous because I wonder if I have anything significant to add. After going through the book again, I chose to create another edition for three reasons: First, with nine years' experience putting its ideas into practice in my home city of Cincinnati, I can be clearer in expressing them. I have put more emphasis on what works, and extracted those thoughts that were nice, but had no durability. The fresh focus in this edition includes updating prior examples and adding a few new ones.

Also, there is growing interest in building community. Call it culture change in organizations, civic engagement in government, neighborhood building in the social sector, outreach in religion, or democracy in the larger society, here seems to be more and more awareness of the need to create places of belonging.

To restore our
connectedness,
we need to see
clearly the
isolation we are
part of and not
be taken in by
the myth of
communal
progress.

The third reason for developing a new edition is just my frustration and pain in seeing what is occurring in the world. Community building now seems to be an idea whose time has come. Its promise, though, is not well implemented. We still do a poor job of bringing people together. At best we convene a social event, a block party, a reception, with food and music. All good things to do, but people most often huddle with like-minded people and strangers remain strangers.

In the midst of the growing awareness of and innovation in thinking about the *need* to build community, the dominant practices about *how* to engage people, civically and organizationally, remain essentially unchanged. We still hold town meetings where one person talks and the rest ask vetted questions. City councils still sit on a platform with microphones and give citizens two minutes each to make their point. Too many gatherings still use PowerPoints for clarity and efficiency. Professional conferences continue to be designed around inspiring keynote speeches and content-filled workshops to attract attendees. Presenting data in this way becomes a weak substitute for learning and education.

Here is one example where the intention was mismatched with the design of the engagement process: In the face of growing poverty, a major city brought together the leaders from business, city government, social service institutions, and neighborhoods to form a task force to reduce poverty. The issue could have been any concern anywhere: education, health, safety, economic growth. In this case it was poverty. Great intention.

The strategy, however, was the same predictable process that has not worked time and time again: First, a high-level steering committee was formed. Next, a sizeable amount of money was committed. Third, an expert outside research group was paid to analyze the problem. Their findings were predictable--poverty is indeed a problem--this then led to setting bold goals, blueprints for actions with timetables, milestones, and measures. This classic problem-solving approach basically called for trying harder at all the things that had been done for years. More mentoring of youth, better school achievement, more job training, greater commitment of large companies to hire more people from poverty neighborhoods. All useful, but nothing in the process raised awareness that poverty is basically a problem of economic isolation. Poverty is not just about the money, it is about the absence of possibility due to our isolation across economic classes, between elite and marginalized neighborhoods, between schools and their neighborhoods, between the elderly and young people. If this isolation, which is the breakdown of community, does not hold center stage, then nothing important will shift. Well intentioned leaders and citizens, without the consciousness and the tools to produce authentic community, will simply be left with more programs, more funding, and eventually another study to analyze progress.

The option, with respect to poverty, is to realize that people living in economic isolation have skills, wisdom, capacities, productive entrepreneurial energy. They have assets we don't see when we view them as problems to be analyzed, measured, and fixed. They don't need more schooling, services, and programs. They need access and relatedness to the wider community.

They need to be seen as citizens worthy of investment capital and loans. They need partnerships with people and institutions across class and geographical boundaries. They require real partnerships, not mentors. There must be relatedness and trust where both sides give and receive.

Building this kind of community is central to a strategy to create conditions where real transformation occurs. This what is working in a few special places. This is point being made in this book.

Image



Youth planting a Garden of Hope in Rochester, NY. Photo courtesy of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation.

Shifting this consciousness and clarifying the tools is what this revised edition is about. To summarize, this is what I have tried to emphasize in this edition:

Isolation is on the rise. This book is about the reconciliation or restoration of the experience of community. It offers ways of thinking and practice to return to a sense of belonging that this mobile, modernist, novelty-seeking culture lacks. It is clear that the isolation in our institutions, cities, and larger world seems to be increasing rather than decreasing. The extremism and rigid ideology that flood all forms of public conversation are painful to witness and, to my mind, partial determinants of the violence that surrounds us. While social media promises to connect us, we still sit in Starbucks, walk down the street, and dine together staring at a flat screen. To restore our connectedness, we need to see clearly the isolation we are part of and not be taken in by the myth of communal progress.

Interest and practice in restoring community is increasing. It goes under the name of civic engagement, community building, organizational outreach, community relations, democracy projects, cooperative movements—all caring for the well-being of the whole. A small example is that communities and organizations have been selecting *Community* to share in local book clubs.

Institutional awareness of the need for community is growing. The not-so-obvious insight is that restoring community is increasingly seen as a productive strategy to address business and civic concerns. What is important, and new, is that our traditional institutions, such as the church, are moving their attention and faith efforts outside their buildings and into their neighborhoods. Places of congregation are now in taverns, common houses, and storefronts.

Rabbis and pastors are leading the community-building movement in forms such as the Parish Collective based in Seattle and the Hive and Just Love in Cincinnati.

The city government of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, is sponsoring an Abundant Community Initiative which supports neighbors in identifying and gathering together the gifts of people on their block in projects aimed at producing more safety and revitalization.

The [Greater Rochester Health Foundation has an eight-year strategy to reduce major illnesses in the community](#) by organizing residents in vulnerable neighborhoods to make their place better, addressing concerns that would seem to have nothing to do with major diseases. They are investing in projects like beautification, community gardens, fixing up distressed buildings, pushing drug traffic out. What does having residents care for their six-block area have to do with fighting cancer, diabetes, heart disease? There is evidence that some of the major determinants of disease are social, relational, communal.

When we have serious structural innovation in community engagement on the part of the church, the government, and foundations, something important is going on.

One more motivation for revising the book is to confront the reality is that even when social pioneers do amazing work and manage to bring people together to make a place better, their work remains an untold story. It competes poorly for all the attention drawn to crisis. Building trust, relationships, and social capital as a strategy for improving health, well-being, and safety, and raising productive children does not make a lot of money for anybody and does not feed the media's—social

media included—appetite for drama and entertainment. What works in the world, as opposed to what is failing in the world, still gets treated as a human-interest story.

All the more reason to keep clarifying why building community and belonging is going to be our most powerful strategy for ending the displacement and isolation that plagues so many aspects of our world. Building community is also a powerful strategy to create resilient organizations, a healthier planet, and safer streets. The purpose in this book is to put the capacity to do this in the hands of citizens, supported, as a backup in the end, by the usual solutions of designing programs, making blueprints, getting funding, and trying all the things that institutions do.

The challenge in this enterprise is that building community seems too simple. If you choose to shift towards a context of possibility instead of staying with a context of deficiency, and you follow the questions and protocols outlined in part two, you will discover how simple it is to end people's isolation. When you reduce people's isolation, they learn that they are not crazy and there is nothing wrong with them. To this end, here is a preview of how I approached this edition:

- I included more examples of how a shift to community building may be more powerful than traditional problem solving and programs. How we approach the persistence of the poverty scenario I described here is one example. Interspersed throughout the text are more instances where social capital, the product of building community, is decisive in creating economic reform where it is most needed.
- In addition to amplifying the need for community and belonging, I show how really simple it is, once we decide it is essential. Overcoming isolation and creating belonging does not take a long time. Like yoga, it is about attention and practice and the mat you are on in the moment. It is not about the particular people and their agility or body shape, nor does it take years of effort. The structure of belonging is simply about getting the room right, forming small groups, getting the questions right, and putting a lid on our desire to rescue, fix, and train.
- I have repurposed the last part of the book to make it more useful as a tool for readers to refresh their knowledge of key concepts, reflect on why these ideas are so elusive in our lives, and think about what they might mean if applied in everyday situations. I have also taken the long list of role models and resources out of the book and placed them on the abundantcommunity.com website.
- More to come.

This blog was originally posted to AbundantCommunity.com, and appears here with permission.

To ensure you don't miss any of this content, sign up for the free Axiom News e-news by clicking [here](#).