

Community: The Structure of Belonging (Part 3 of 3: The Importance of Belonging)



A community garden in Rochester, New York. Photo courtesy of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation

Community: The Structure of Belonging (Part 3 of 3: The Importance of Belonging)
Wednesday, August 15, 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 2, click [here](#).

In making all these changes I have accentuated the major point of the book: that the strong cultural imperative of individualism and the belief that science and technology will solve the problems of climate, corporate productivity, school performance, customer satisfaction, and immortality will only increase the violence, poverty, and unnecessary suffering that we are confronted with every day. Community and its structure of belonging does something about this.

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The word *belong* has two meanings. First and foremost, to belong is to be related to and a part of something. It is membership, the experience of being at home in the broadest sense of the phrase. Belonging is best created when we join with other people in producing something that makes a place better. It is the opposite of

thinking that I must do it on my own. That wherever I am, it is all on my shoulders and that perhaps I would be better off somewhere else. The opposite of belonging is to feel isolated and always (all ways) on the margin, an outsider. I am still forever wandering, looking for that place where I belong. To belong is to know, even in the middle of the night, that I am among friends.

Our purpose in exploring the concepts and methods of community building is to increase the amount of belonging or relatedness that exists in the world. We do this partly out of a desire for good, but primarily because if we want to fill those empty storefronts, raise our children, engage those wandering on the sidewalks during the day, building community is a precondition for that to occur. Experiencing the kind of friendship, hospitality, conviviality that constitutes community is not easy or natural in the world we now live in, and that is why the storefronts stay empty, the children stay challenged, and suffering stays around us.

The second meaning of the word *belong* has to do with being an owner: Something belongs to me. To belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community. What I consider mine I will build and nurture. The work, then, is to seek in our communities a wider and deeper sense of emotional ownership and communal ownership. It means fostering among all of a community's citizens a sense of ownership and accountability, both in our relationships and what we actually control.

Belonging can also be thought of as a longing to be. Being is our capacity to find our deeper purpose in all that we do. It is the capacity to be present, and to discover our authenticity and whole selves. This is often thought of as an individual capacity, but it is also a community capacity. Community is the container within which our longing to be is fulfilled. Without the connectedness of a community, we will continue to choose not to be. I have always been touched by the term *beloved community*. This is often expressed in a spiritual context, but it also is possible in the secular aspects of our everyday life.

My intent in this book is to give definition to ways of structuring the experience of belonging—that's why the first noun in its subtitle is *structure*. Belonging does not have to be left to chance or be dependent on the welcoming nature of others.

My thinking about structure has been shaped by a quote from a wonderful periodical devoted to art and architecture called *The Structurist*:

The word *structure* means “to build, to construct, to form, as well as the organization or morphology of the elements involved in the process. It can be seen as the embodiment of creation ... a quest not only for form but also for purpose, direction and continuity.”

This quote refers to art, and we can apply the same thoughts to community. The promise of what follows is to provide structural ways to create the experience of belonging, not only in places where people come just to be together socially, but especially in places where we least expect it.

These include all the places where people come together to get something done—our meetings, dialogues, conferences, planning processes, all those gatherings where we assemble to reflect on and decide the kind of future we want for ourselves.

I especially like the word *structure* because it stands in relief to our concern about style. To offer structures with the promise of creating community gives leaders relief from the common story that leadership is a set of personal qualities we are born with, develop, or try on like a new suit to see if they fit. The structures in this book—both the thinking and the practices—can be chosen and implemented regardless of personal style, or lack thereof. We can create structures of belonging even if we are introverted and do not like to make eye contact... .

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