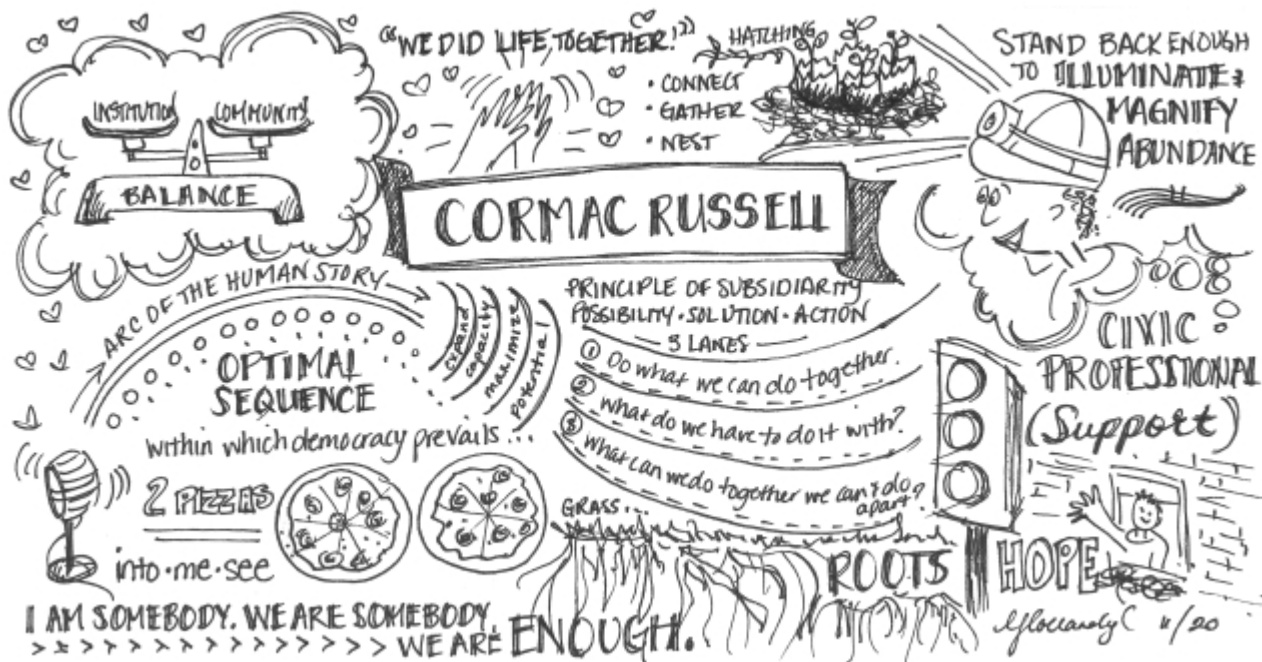


A Lot Would Open Up If We Quit Over-Reaching

Image



Eighty-five per cent of what determines our health is how associative we are:
Cormac Russell

In nature, a nest is built by gathering many, many, many, many, small little bits and connecting them productively. Cormac Russell, author of [Rekindling Democracy](#), says that at the heart of matters in our time is nesting.

Why nesting?

“What’s kind of funny, at the moment, is that whether you are a socialist, a communist, a capitalist, or a neo-liberal, you broadly all agree that institutions are the answer,” he says.

An institution is a way of organizing to get beyond self-interest and any one person's capability and contribution. Historically, what has happened is that as we engage with one another stuff emerged that needed doing that simply wasn't possible through individual capacity or even association.

"It was possible for us to sing solos and it was possible for us to sing in choirs, but it was not possible to do some other stuff that required some institutional capacity. In the arc of the human story there is something about sequence, there's an optimal sequence," he says.

The job of the professional is not to harvest people from the community space and into institutionalized programs, but to enhance freedom, deepen associational life, and cheer on functionality.

Cormac proposes that we think about the optimum sequential conditions within which democracy can prevail, “within which the best of me, of my family, of my community, of my friendship networks, can do what it is we can do. And then beyond that, what is it that institutions can do to extend our capacity, not to displace or replace it?”

That’s the rub to extend our capacity ... not to displace or replace it.

There is a dynamic, there are relationships in these dynamics that can be optimal, sub-optimal, or actually really harmful. The intersections can be productive, non-productive, or counter-productive. And, as it turns out, scale matters.

The institutions that know how to be in right relationship with the people they serve tend to have numerically no more of a group or team of people they can feed with two pizzas, Cormac says.

Now we have the ... Rule of Two Pizzas.

If it gets beyond that, things get complicated.

Subsidiarity, a term in political philosophy, means that no bigger institution, no bigger entity, will do that which a smaller one can do.

The optimal sequence of activity is that people, community members and citizens, “define the possibility. We define the solution. We take action. And then there will be stuff we can’t do ourselves.”

The trouble starts to arise when an institution overreaches and activity becomes disembedded from community. This pulls at the nesting, unravels things, and creates harm.

As community members grow in their capacity to hatch and be fruitful, they’ll come more often into contact with professionals and institutions. How we navigate those relationships and dynamics will determine the future of our democracies, communities, and lived experience.

How then do professionals and institutions find their way into and through these

relationships and dynamics?

Cormac proposes the idea of the civic professional who is thinking, “how can I animate, support, precipitate citizenship and community building? Then, mindful of context, supplement that with my expertise. How do I arrive very much with the assumption that you have as sharp a mind and as noble a heart as me, and that the issue may be that you are disconnected from other people who can magnify the possibility you see?”

The job of the professional is not to harvest people from the community space and into institutionalized programs, but to enhance freedom, deepen associational life, and cheer on functionality. The job of the professional arriving in community is to be a citizen first, a nester, gathering those many, many, many, many, small little bits and connecting them productively.

As associational life is deepened, so we become healthier.

What if this mass localism, subsidiarity, were practiced broadly?

“We’d be healthier. There’d be less dissociation going on. We’d, across our life course have more comfort and stability in talking about pain and trauma. Economically, we’d have an alternative to making money in the morning and doing good in the afternoon. The issue isn’t the economy. The issue is when the economy becomes disembedded from community, that its bigness, giantism, becomes problematic and overreaching. The economy would become more egalitarian. We’d reorganize our money and our wealth. There would be consequences for our ecological futures and planetary wellbeing. Our kids would reoccupy the streets and become descreened and de-mauled/malled,” Cormac says.

People would become disabused of the idea that the institution will sort it out.

“We’d have a conversation about sufficiency which would not be fear-based. We’d have the sense that: I’m a somebody, we are somebody, we are enough.”

We’d have a sense of wellness.

In this second part of a two-part podcast conversation, Cormac Russell opens the door to a deeper definition of democracy than we're used to. This article is a weaving of some the insights shared during our conversation.

To read and listen to part one of this conversation, visit: [Deeper Democracy the Antidote in Pandemic-Conscious Future](#)

Listen to this and other [Axiom News Podcasts on Spotify](#).

You can learn more about Cormac Russell and his work at [Nurture Development](#) and [Rekindling Democracy](#).

Illustration by Yvonne Hollandy.