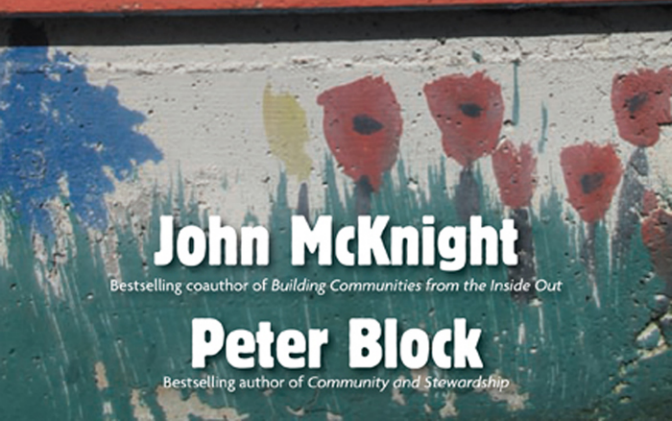
The Abundant Community

Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods



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An Excerpt From

The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods

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Welcome

THIS BOOK IS AN INVITATION into a new possibility for each of us to live a more satisfying life. We welcome how you, the reader, bring your own unique experience and insights into this book through the act of reading it. In this way, you are creating this book just as you are creating your life, your neighborhood, and the larger community of the world. This idea of cocreation is key to a satisfying life, which becomes possible when we join our neighbors to live and create a community that nurtures our family and makes us useful citizens.

This possibility of more satisfaction through creating something with those around us is idealistic, and yet it is within our grasp. It is a possibility that is both visionary and realistic. Our culture tells us that a satisfying life can only be purchased. It tells us that in the place where we live, we don't have the resources to create a good life. That we must find the expertise from marketers and professionals. This book reminds us that a neighborhood can raise a child, provide security, sustain our health, secure our income, and care for our vulnerable people. Each of these is within the power of our community.

This power is silent on most streets where we live. However, it is possible to give voice to a neighborhood that is able to speak the language of satisfaction—a language that the marketplace can never speak, in spite of its alluring promise that we can buy a good life.

There is a neighborhood ideal that we all believe in, but it is usually a whisper. When we speak up for this ideal, our voices tell of our gifts, our hospitality, our relationships, and living by the habits of our heart.

This book gives voice to the ideal of an abundant—or some call a beloved—community. It reminds us of our power to create a full and complete life. It assures us that when we join together with our neighbors, we are the architects of the future that we want to live within. Such a future is made possible through the untapped abundance of every community, especially our own.

This is why the book concludes with ways in which neighbors have awakened to their abundance. And also why the book invites you to connect with the thousands of others around the world who are collecting the gifts of their family and neighborhood to create a more powerful community and satisfying life.

PART I

The Shift from Citizen to Consumer

A CITIZEN IS ONE who is a participant in a democracy, regardless of their legal status. It is one who chooses to create the life, the neighborhood, the world from their own gifts and the gifts of others. Many who have the full legal rights assigned by their country continue to wait for others to provide them with satisfaction and contribute little to democracy or the well-being of their community. At the same time, there are major contributors to community and democracy who do not enjoy the legal status of "citizenship." We would still consider these people to be citizens because they function as full participants in what is necessary for a democracy to work.

A consumer is one who has surrendered to others the power to provide what is essential for a full and satisfied life. This act of surrender goes by many names: client, patient, student, audience, fan, shopper. All customers, not citizens. Consumerism is not about shopping, but about the transformation of citizens into consumers.

Our intention in part 1 is to look at what happens to the family, the neighborhood, and the community when we make the shift from citizen to consumer. When we go to the marketplace and the professional to seek satisfaction**,** something happens to our capacity to prosper and find peace of mind. Our premise is that these cannot be purchased.

Our larger purpose, fulfilled in later chapters, is to describe a few powerful and simple actions to do something about this. To reclaim the role of citizen. To move from individualist/spectator into community. To go from addiction to choice. This is the shift that will simultaneously restore vital functions to the family and the neighborhood and reconstruct the competence of community—all of which come under assault in a consumer culture.

1 The Limits of Consumption

THE ESSENTIAL PROMISE of a consumer society is that satisfaction can be purchased. This promise runs so deep in us that we have come to take our identity from our capacity to purchase. To borrow from Descartes, "I shop, therefore I am." This dependency on shopping is not just about things; it includes the belief that most of what is fulfilling or needed in life can be bought—from happiness to healing, from love to laughter, from rearing a child to caring for someone at the end of life.

In our effort to find satisfaction through consumption, we are converted from citizen to consumer, and the implications of this are more profound than we realize. This is clearest when we explore two particular consequences of a consumer society: its effect on the function of the family and its impact on the competence of the community.

One social cost of consumption is that the family has lost its function. It is no longer the primary unit that raises a child, sustains our health, cares for the vulnerable, and ensures economic security. The family, while romanticized and held as a cultural ideal, has been a casualty of the growth of consumption and therefore lost much of its purpose. Its usefulness has been compromised.

The second social cost is that, in too many cases, we are disconnected from our neighbors and isolated from our communities. Consequently, the community and neighborhood are no longer competent. When we

use the term *community competence*, we mean the capacity of the place where we live to be useful to us, to support us in creating those things that can be produced only in the surroundings of a connected community.

When they are competent, communities operate as a supportive and mediating space central to the capacity of a family to fulfill its functions. A competent community provides a safety net for the care of a child, attention and relatedness for the vulnerable, the means for economic survival for the household, and many of the social tools that sustain health. If the function of the family is to raise a child and provide what we can summarize in the phrase *peace of mind*, then it is the community that provides the primary determinants of success of these functions.

In a consumer society, these functions are removed from family and community and provided by the marketplace; they are designed to be purchased. We now depend on systems to provide our basic functions. For example:

- We expect the school, coaches, agencies, and sitters to raise our children. We deliver our children in the morning and pick them up later in the day. Same-day service, just like the laundry.
- We expect doctors to keep us healthy. We believe in better living though chemistry. We think that youth, a flat stomach, a strong heart, even sexual desire are all purchasable.
- We want social workers and institutions to take care of the vulnerable. Retirement homes are a growth industry marketing aging as the "golden years" best spent in a resort-like environment with other old people.

What this means is that the space that the family and community were designed to fill has been sold and is now empty.

There is widespread recognition that the lost community has to be refound. You see the signs everywhere. Urban design focuses on community connections. Community builders and organizers exist in every city and town. Our intent is to move the conversation about community forward and remind ourselves what citizens can do to bring satisfaction into modern life.

The Consumer Way: Lives of Scarcity and Consumption

Some costs of the consumer life have been discussed for some time. We are familiar with the spiritual downside of materialism, the social competition of conspicuous consumption, the effects of waste on the environment, the ethical questions of planned obsolescence. What is not typically included in the conversation about consumerism is its effects on the isolation and loneliness that is clearly common in our suburbs and our cities.

We asked a group of suburban women about their lives and their connection with their community.

Each said she moved to where she now lives for the sake of the children. They wanted a safe place and what they thought would be good schools. Said one:

It is who I am now. I gave up my prior career to move here and live this life.

What is "this life"? Listen to what these women had to say about the choice they made:

I live in a "poverty of wealth." I do not know my neighbors. Everyone has lawn care, professionals put up holiday lights, and relationships are formed by the ability to buy things. I learn about my neighbors from the cleaning lady and handyman.

We have some conversations with those who pass by. I don't really know them, but there is some reciprocity. It is mostly accidental contact. There are lots of porches, but few people sit on them. You can go a whole winter and barely see a neighbor.

We live in our backyard. Home has more of an internal orientation; we stay within.

It is good in a crisis. People in some ways do look out for each other. They will watch the house, feed the cat.

High income means high turnover. There is not time to invest in relationships. Home is more of a practical matter.

The friends come from the school and the swim club. Motherhood is the way we build a social life. The children bring us together. There is a connectedness for those willing to organize it. I started a book club.

We have sold our souls to orchestrating our children's lives. We don't have a life of our own, but we can manage everyone else's. We live vicariously through our children.

We are isolated and insulated in our cars. No sidewalks—we drive everywhere.

We had a second discussion with the husbands of these women. They were professionals and executives and gave their version of the good life.

We moved here to find a safe haven where children can prosper.

We have connected with other families through kids' sports; this is how we gained our friends. School is our common link.

My strongest community is with the men I play golf with. We go on trips together.

Asked if they would move to this neighborhood if they did not have kids, most said no.

With the kids grown, we know fewer and fewer people in the neighborhood. Now we get together once a year at Christmas time.

We know three people in the neighborhood, and feel disconnected.

I play jazz, and that has been a great outlet for me. I also fly airplanes. My pilot community is very tight.

Community is being among like-minded people. The suburbs are more homogenized. It does get a little boring sometimes. I want to break out, but how do you do that?

As far as diversity, it is nice to be in a non-physician group for a change of pace. [Physician speaking.] Others in my golf group are an accountant, an engineer, and a salesman in leasing.

This community is not set up for mingling with people. When we cut the grass, we wave or ignore each other, but do not really know neighbors.

In suburbs, we drive in and out of the house. It is a really nice house; all the resources are there. No reason to leave there, no sense of community. Very practical choice. Life is about gathering good resources.

I arrive at night in the car, after dark, eat dinner and have a regular evening routine. I can go for two months and not see anyone in the neighborhood.

My grandfather lived only five years in a small town in Kentucky. He walked to town every day, and at the end, many came to his funeral. Where I live, no one a block away would come to my funeral.

These comments speak of a life that from a distance would seem to be the culmination of the American dream. Those speaking have what most people think they want. The question is how to make sense of the poignancy and disconnectedness of their lives.

What they are telling us about is a culture created and sustained by a system or institutional way of life. A system life is a way of living that is not our own but one that is named by another. To live a system life is to live a managed life, a life organized around the products, services, and beliefs of systems. This is a direct result and demand of the built-in structure and assumptions of a consumer society.

In 1977, the great social observer Wendell Berry wrote about life in the consumer society, which he pinned on our dependence on specialists, people expertly trained to provide us through the marketplace what we once provided for ourselves.

> The disease of the modern character is specialization. Looked at from the standpoint of the social *system*, the aim of specialization may seem desirable enough. The aim is to see that the responsibilities of government, law, medicine, engineering, agriculture, and education are given into the hands of the most skilled, best prepared people. The difficulties do not appear until we look at specialization from the opposite standpoint—that of individual persons. We then begin to see the grotesquery—indeed the impossibility—of an idea of community wholeness that divorces itself from any idea of personal wholeness.[2] . . .
>
> The beneficiary of the regime of specialists ought to be the happiness of mortals—or so we are expected to believe. *All* of [the average citizen's] vital concerns are in the hands of certified experts. He is a certified expert himself and as such he earns more money in a year than all his great-grandparents put together. Between stints at his job he has nothing to do but mow his lawn with a sit down lawn mower, or watch other certified

experts on television. At suppertime he may eat a tray of ready-prepared food, which and his wife (also a certified expert) procure at the cost only of money, transportation and the pushing of a button. For a few minutes between supper and sleep he may catch a glimpse of his children, who since breakfast have been in the care of education experts, basketball or marching-band experts or perhaps legal experts.

The fact is, however, that this is probably the most unhappy average citizen in the history of the world. He has not the power to provide himself with anything but money, and his money is inflating [or contracting—our addition] like a balloon and drifting away, subject to historical circumstances and the power of other people.[3]

What Berry describes is the life of a consumer, what we are calling the *consumer way*.

The Citizen Way: Lives of Abundance and Cooperation

We want to contrast the consumer way with the vision offered in another set of interviews. These are people, in this instance Appalachians living in Cincinnati, Ohio, who either by choice or circumstance are not encased in the consumer society. They are not the products of it or the winners in it. Consuming has its attractions, but for these people it is not the point or the provider of the good life. Here are statements from people who have a different view about the culture within which they reside.

We know our neighbors. People know all about us. There are no secrets among us.

We are surrounded with social support; we take care of each other. We extend ourselves to our kin network, even though they are not our kin.

There are people that are good looking like me. I grew up thinking there was something wrong with me. That was reinforced by systems, the military, schools. Then, when I was taken in by this community, I discovered who I was and that I was good looking.

We have wisdom, which we call common sense. We have self-taught skills, family taught. Intelligence is connected to character and morals. You can get a PhD, but it doesn't count.

We are storytellers. I will tell you my story, and if I am in the right mood, I might listen to yours.

Our faith is not based upon what churches teach. Plus even if you claim to be a Catholic or Episcopalian, you are still Baptist or Pentecostal.

We have discovered a way not to be lonely.

We know how to do without. Make ends meet. Make do. We do this together.

We take care of our own. There are no foster kids, only grandmothers and cousins.

This is a set of beliefs of people who live in a more competent community, who live in a way they have chosen, and who experience a more satisfied life than most. They are less dependent on the material culture and its requirements and call. They do not work in systems or reap the benefits of them. They think they have enough; their mindset is abundance, not scarcity. Their families have a function; they have the power to provide.

The two sets of statements are about culture. Culture is composed of the ways that a people have developed to survive in a particular place. To the mainstream culture, the people symbolizing the citizen way are considered outsiders, perhaps even disadvantaged. For our purposes, we call this a competent community and its members citizens rather than consumers, its families functional or function filled.

A Choice of Culture

This contrast between the consumer way and the citizen way is a discussion not about a market economy or materialism, but about social and civic life. The social and civic life of families and neighborhoods. The people voicing the consumer way have constructed their lives outside the family home and neighborhood. They find others through work, schools, and vocations . . . they associate with others, form relationships, by becoming proficient in system life. The statements representing the citizen way are from people for whom the family and neighborhood is the place where their social life takes form. They are not dependent on systems or

a managed existence for their satisfaction. They have become proficient in associational life.

For many Americans, however, the autonomous service-seeking family is perfectly normal, and whether or not it has strong ties in its local community is not an important issue. Focusing on the neighbors for a moment as an example, many would say it would be "nice" to know the neighbors better. But as a life priority, that ranks somewhere near the desirability of adding heated seats to their automobile. You can get where you're going without it, but it can add a little enjoyment to the drive.

So are they right? Can we get where we want to go without a strong local community? Or is it just a bit of social amenity? Many of us think it is just an amenity because we believe the road that will take us where we want to go is paved with accumulating more. We have committed ourselves to winning in the consumer economy. This is the world where the good life is measured and defined by the sum of the goods and services that we buy:

> Want to be safe? Buy a home in suburbia.
>
> Want to be healthy? Get a good doctor and comprehensive insurance.
>
> Want to have children who are successful? Send them to the best schools and start them as early as possible.
>
> Want to be well cared for? Find a good therapist, family counselor, and nursing home.
>
> Want economic security? Invest where you can achieve passive income. Make money you do not have to work for.
>
> Worried about the environment? Buy products with the word "natural" on the label; send dollars to your favorite environmental group.
>
> Want to be happy and serve your country in a moment of crisis? Go shopping.

This belief that the good life depends on consumption is a unique worldview that is less than a century old. It gained momentum in the

1920s and became "the gospel of consumption"—the notion that people could be convinced that however much they had, it wasn't enough.

Jeffrey Kaplan, in an article in *Orion* magazine, precisely lays out the thinking that drives our life today. His point is that the desire for consumption was driven by a concern about the excess productive capacity of the private sector. He cites a 1927 interview in the magazine *Nation's Business*, in which Secretary of Labor James J. Davis provided some numbers to illustrate a problem that the *New York Times* called "need saturation." Davis noted that "the textile mills of this country can produce all the cloth needed in six months' operation each year" and that 14 percent of the American shoe factories could produce a year's supply of footwear. The magazine went on to suggest, "It may be that the world's needs ultimately will be produced by three days' work a week."[4] This was considered a problem.

The corporate world was concerned not only about excess capacity, but also about social unrest that would be exaggerated by too much leisure time. "John E. Edgerton, president of the National Association of Manufacturers," Kaplan writes, "typified their response when he declared: 'I am for everything that will make work happier but against everything that will further subordinate its importance. The emphasis should be put on work—more work and better work.'" "Nothing," Edgerton claimed, "breeds radicalism more than unhappiness unless it is leisure."

To seal the argument, Kaplan refers to a 1929 article by Charles Kettering, director of General Motors Research, titled, "Keep the Consumer Dissatisfied." "He wasn't suggesting that manufacturers produce shoddy products," Kaplan says. "Along with many of his corporate cohorts, he was defining a strategic shift for American industry—from fulfilling basic human needs to creating new ones." This means that no matter what or how much you purchase, you will always end up wanting more. This is the foundation of the consumer society.

It worked. No matter what our desire, we believe that specialists and systems can provide it. We think that

Health is in a hospital.

Entertainment is on TV or an MP3 player.

Marriage is in a counselor's office.

Mental well-being (health) is a therapist's job.

Mobility is in a car.

Housing is produced by a developer.

Meals are produced by restaurants, take-out counters, and fast-food emporiums.

People with this belief system are not a family in community. They are actually a group of consumers living in the same house. The effect is that the family and its local community have no real functions. And this loss of real purpose for family and community accounts significantly for the collapse of many families in what we call *divorce*—a word for the dissolution of a group with no real function.

The greatest tragedy of the consumer life is that its practitioners do not see that the local community is abundant with the relationships that are the principal resource for rescuing themselves and their families from the failure, dependency, and isolation that are the results of a life as a consumer and client. Their ships are sinking, and they struggle to swim to safety, ignoring the life raft at their side.

The way to the good life is not through consumption. It is, instead, a path that we make by walking it with those who surround us. It is the way of a competent community recognizing its abundance.

We, together, become the producers of a satisfying future. We see that if we are to be citizens, together we must be the creators and producers of our future. And if we want to be the creators and producers of our future, we must become citizens, not consumers. A consumer is essentially dependent on the creations of the market and in the end produces nothing but waste.

Neighborhood Necessities

Our communities are abundant with the resources we need for the future. It is the awakening of families and neighborhoods to these resources that is needed. Consumer access to all that business, professions, and government have to offer still leaves our lives half full. Community

life fills the glass the rest of the way, and this is why a strong local community is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Safety and Security

As Jane Jacobs, author, activist, and icon of the importance of a vital neighborhood, wrote years ago, a safe street is produced by eyes on the street.[5] It is produced by people walking around, sitting outside, knowing neighbors, and being part of a social fabric. No number of gates or professional security people on patrol can make us safe. They can increase arrests, but basically safety is in the hands of citizens. Citizens outside the house, interacting with others, being familiar with the comings and goings of the neighbors.

Every chief of police in our major cities now has a standard speech explaining the limits of local law enforcement as a tool to keep a person or a neighborhood safe. They all advocate some form of local community organization that connects neighbors in a mutual alliance for security. Some police departments even send officers into the neighborhoods to organize local block clubs as the principal means of protecting their security.

This is an interesting paradox. We pay police to make us safe, and then they spend some of our money to send us police officers who tell us that the strength of our own community ties is essential for our safety! There is a name for it: community policing. This police message is confirmed by all kinds of social science research. One of the best is a Chicago study by Robert Sampson and colleagues that found that two factors often predicted whether a neighborhood was crime prone:

Is there mutual trust and altruism among neighbors?

Are neighbors willing to intervene when children misbehave?[6]

Of course, this trust and community responsibility can develop only when neighbors know and are committed to each other. So, the suburbanites whose local relationships are limited to a cheery hello to the neighbor, and the urbanites whose fear keeps them from even saying hello, are all increasing their chance to be a victim.

And if, in fear, they turn to the police, a community relations officer will arrive and urge them to create organized relationships with their neighbors.

Health

Like knowledgeable police leaders, most public health officials and hospital administrators have a standard presentation on health. Medicine, they say, is a minor determinant of our health—that is, how often we are sick and how long we live. They point out that while genetic inheritance counts, the major factors determining our health are our

Individual behavior

Social relationships

Physical environment

Each of these is closely related to our local community ties. Individual behavior—what we eat and whether we exercise—is determined locally by community custom and small group relationships. Indeed, social science research demonstrates that the most effective means of changing behavior is local small groups, such as the "twelve step" organizations Alcoholics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous.[7]

Local social relationships are major health sources.[8] A nine-year study in California found that people with the fewest social ties had the highest risk of dying from heart disease, circulatory problems, and cancer. Robert Putnam reports, in *Bowling Alone*, that if you belong to no local groups and then join just one, you cut your risk of dying the next year in half![9]

The physical environment includes the toxins in our food and air and the design of our automobiles. The control of these factors grows out of the regulations created by our local political action as citizens.

When we act together in our neighborhood, we produce the primary sources of health. When we are disconnected, we create business for the specialists in the medical system. And then, like the police, the medical system's leaders turn the tables back on us and say the major source of our health is our community action. Alternatively, the medical system expands and becomes more costly as our local communities grow weaker and forgo their power to support healthy lives.

The Well-Being of Children

"It takes a village to raise a child" is an African saying repeated as a matter of faith by American leaders of all persuasions. And yet, most of our children are not raised by a village. Instead, they are raised by teachers and counselors in school, youth workers and coaches out of school, juvenile therapists and corrections officials if they are deviant, television and computers and cell phones if they have spare time, and McDonald's if they are hungry.

Instead of a village, they are surrounded by paid professionals, electronic toys, and teen marketers. They are being trained to be comprehensive consumers and clients. And as they become young adults, the research demonstrates that they are much less socially connected than their grandparents were at their age. They are, as adults, more isolated and dependent on money to pave their way to the future. Recession would devastate them, unsupported by friends, neighbors, and community groups who can provide a social safety net.

Until the twentieth century, every society in all of history raised its children in villages, where the basic idea was that children become effective grown-ups by being connected with community adults in their productive roles.

Youth learned from the community and were productive for the community. They learned the skills, traditions, and customs of the community through their relationships with the adults. They were not exiled to the world of paid people and clienthood. Today, it is clear that the most effective local communities have reclaimed their youth and assumed primary responsibility for their upbringing. The research on this point is decisive. Where there are "thick" community connections, both child development and school performance improve.

Conversely, localities with very little social connection consistently reflect negative lives for their children. However, it doesn't take a social scientist to teach us this. We see around us, at every level of income, the costs of trying to pay for someone else to rear our children. We see it in gangs, mall-centered children, and negative behavior that grows because the local community has not surrounded and guided the young.

In the end, we see children who are school-smart but worldly unwise because they have not shared in the wisdom, experience, and loving care of the people in their community.

The Environment and the Land

As we learn more and more about the ecology of our world, the interconnectedness of everything has become clear. Each level of society has its own role in preserving the web of life. At the neighborhood level, our decisions about such mundane questions as light bulbs, insulation, turning off lights, thermostatic controls, waste reduction, and recycling are major factors in the recovery of the earth. Our likelihood of making those decisions is greatly influenced by our community culture.

One sees the power of that culture in the universal norms about cutting our lawns. If we are to have similar norms about preserving energy and incorporating new forms, they will grow most powerfully in those neighborhoods with strong community connections and values.

Similarly, the common outdoor neighborhood space depends on our local stewardship. How we respect and control the development of our land is a community responsibility—a fact that our Native Americans understand so well. We see examples of the shift in programs like community gardens and community supported agriculture.

An Enterprising Economy

The neighborhood is also the natural nest for hatching new enterprise. It is the birthplace and home of small business. And small business is what provides the largest employment growth in the country. Plus it is friends and family that most often provide the original capital and sweat equity to start a business.

Many applied economists are recognizing that the culture of a local community is an important factor in nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit. Once again, in *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam has done research that shows the link between associational life and the development of entrepreneurship in Italy.[10]

A community where local people feel they are a center of enterprise creates the vision and support for entrepreneurs. In these communities, the members use their buying power to support local enterprises, put their savings to community work in credit unions and responsible local financial institutions, and encourage young people to initiate enterprises.

Local dollars circulate throughout the neighborhood, providing the mutual economic support that parallels and strengthens the local social

support. Some communities have also created a local currency to provide incentive to support the local economy.

A related economic power of a strongly connected community is access to jobs. It is still the case that nearly one-quarter of American job seekers get their job information from relatives, friends, and neighbors.[11]

Strong local neighborhood connections spawn new enterprises, sustain them through the years, and provide primary access to employment. Remove these functions and the American economy will become half full, a land of large-scale institutions that are unable, over time, to sustain a local workforce and so large that they are destined to fail to serve the interests of anyone but themselves.

Food

One of the social movements that seems to be gaining momentum is organized around food. It is the convergence of several smaller movements. There is the health dimension of being more conscious about what we eat. Disease and shorter life expectancy are tied increasingly to a poor diet.

There are the environmental and climate concerns about how food is produced. Many are concerned about crop rotation and care for the land, plus the amount of grain produced to feed cattle, pigs, and chickens and how this contributes to hunger in the world by diverting food for humans into food for animals.

There is concern about the energy requirements of transporting food over long distances and the machinery needed to cultivate large farms. We worry about the chemicals used to grow crops more efficiently and the chemicals that go into extending the shelf life of processed foods.

As we become conscious of how central food is to our health, it draws our attention to the importance of food security. If we want to know how our food is produced, how it is harvested and handled, and how far it travels, this is best done through local production. If we want to be educated about the effects of diet and keep our health in our own hands, this is within the capacity of our local community.

Our way of producing and relating to food integrates many of the elements that are key to satisfaction. Supporting local producers and markets does our part to solve the energy problem caused by transportation of food from continents away. We do our part to solve our economic problems by

circulating our dollars locally. Being an activist about food gets us involved in the education of our children. It also is another argument for community gardens, which can be a source of local income as well as the beautification and care for local, often urban, open space. And we will be improving our health by eating food free of poisons and petroleum.

Care

Care is the freely given commitment from the heart of one person to another. It is the most powerful aspect of our relationships. When we put it into words, we say, "I care for my family above all." "I will care for my dad until the day he dies." "I care so much about this community that I will never leave it." These words tell us that care is within us.

In the consumer ecology, the word *care* has been coopted by systems: businesses, agencies, and governments. We receive mass-produced letters from our insurance agency telling us it cares about us (whoever we may be). Our charities ask us to give money to pay for the care of people. Our government has a huge bureaucracy designed to pay hospitals and medical professionals for their service, and they call it Medicare.

In each case, they are actually providing a paid service—not care. This is a key distinction, the difference between care and service. Systems offer services for pay; they offer actuarial, medical, and administrative services. We know it is not care, because genuine care cannot be paid for. It is given, free of charge.

You can pay for nursing services for your mother in a nursing home, but she will lose the surrounding care of her family, friends, neighbors, and faith and community groups. They will become visitors to a service system, and she will become a client.

The place to look for care is in the dense relationships of local neighbors and their community groups. If they have a competent community, it will be because they care about each other, and they care about the neighborhood. Together, their care manifests a vision and a culture. And it is this vision, culture, and commitment that have the unique capacity to ensure much of their sense of well-being and happiness. This is the source of satisfaction that is complete in and of itself; it is not dependent on the next purchase.

Community Possibilities

No business, agency, or government can fulfill these seven community functions, because of their inherent limits. Only our community capacity has the power to fill the glass to the brim.

So if we don't know our neighbors, aren't active in local community life, pay for others to raise our children and service our elders, and try to buy our way into a good life, we pay a larger price. We produce, unintentionally as it might be, a weak family, a careless community, and a nation that tries hopelessly to revive itself from the top down.

Reversing this situation is what the remainder of the book is about. This path is very difficult. In chapters 2 and 3, we expand on the difficulty, highlight the power of the system world, and clarify the distinction between being a consumer and being a citizen. We do this with the belief that when we see the magnitude of what faces us, it gives us more choice in the matter. From chapter 4 through the end of the book, we outline what can restore the function of the family and competence of the community. If you are the kind of person that wants to skip the critique and difficulty of our current condition and jump right to the future, you can go directly to chapter 4.

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Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods

by John McKnight and Peter Block
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