

COMMUNITY

THE STRUCTURE OF BELONGING

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an excerpt from

Community
The Structure of Belonging
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Welcome

This book is written to support those who care for the well-being of their community. It is for anyone who wants to be part of creating an organization, neighborhood, city, or country that works for all, and who has the faith and the energy to create such a place.

I am one of those people. Whenever I am in a neighborhood or small town and see empty storefronts, watch people floating aimlessly on the sidewalks during school or working hours, pass by housing projects, or read about crime, poverty, or a poor environment in the places where our children and our brothers and sisters live, I am distressed and anguished. It has become impossible for me to ignore the fact that the world we are creating does not come close to fulfilling its promise.

Along with this distress comes the knowledge that each of us, myself included, is participating in creating this world. If it is true that we are creating this world, then each of us has the power to heal its woundedness. This is not about guilt, it is about accountability. Citizens, in their capacity to come together and choose to be accountable, are our best shot at making a difference.

This book is for all who are willing to take a leadership role that affirms the conviction that without a willingness to be accountable for our part in creating a strong and connected community, our desire to reduce suffering and increase happiness in the world becomes infinitely more difficult to fulfill. It is also based on the belief that in some way the vitality and connectedness of our communities will determine the strength of our democracy.

Community as used here is about the experience of belonging. We are in community each time we find a place where we belong. 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. It is the opposite of thinking that wherever I am, I would be better off somewhere else. Or that I am still forever wandering, looking for that place where I belong. The opposite of belonging is to feel isolated and always (all ways) on the margin, an outsider. To belong is to know, even in the middle of the night, that I am among friends.

One goal in exploring the concepts and methods of community building in this book is to increase the amount of belonging or relatedness that exists in the world. Experiencing this kind of friendship, hospitality, conviviality is not easy or natural in the world we now live in.

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; it means fostering among all of a community's citizens a sense of ownership and accountability.

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. [See Role Models and Resources.]

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.

A disclaimer: If you believe that our communities are basically doing well and all that's needed is to continuously improve them, then this book is not going to make a lot of sense. Its sole purpose is to provide a path toward creating a future different from what we now have.

A word about the structure of the book. I have included a summary of each chapter at its beginning. I got the idea from Christopher Alexander's *Timeless Way of Building*. There he said that if you do not want to read the whole book or a whole chapter, just read the summaries and you will get the point. Also, the main points are summarized in outline form at the end, so if you do not want to read the chapter summaries, or the text, you can go to the Book at a Glance and really save some time.

The Fragmented Community and Its Transformation

The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole. The key is to identify how this transformation occurs. We begin by shifting our attention from the problems of community to the possibility of community. We also need to acknowledge that our wisdom about individual transformation is not enough when it comes to community transformation. So, one purpose here is to bring together our knowledge about the nature of collective transformation. A key insight in this pursuit is to accept the importance of social capital to the life of the community. This begins the effort to create a future distinct from the past.



The need to create a structure of belonging grows out of the isolated nature of our lives, our institutions, and our communities. The absence of belonging is so widespread that we might say we are living in an age of isolation, imitating the lament from early in the last century, when life was referred to as the age of anxiety. Ironically, we talk today of how small our world has become, with the shrinking effect of globalization, instant sharing of information, quick technology, workplaces that operate around the globe. Yet these do not necessarily create a sense of belonging. They provide connection, diverse information, an infinite range of opinion. But all this does not create the connection from which we can become

grounded and experience the sense of safety that arises from a place where we are emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically a member.

Our isolation occurs because western culture, our individualistic narrative, the inward attention of our institutions and our professions, and the messages from our media all fragment us. We are broken into pieces.

One aspect of our fragmentation is the gaps between sectors of our cities and neighborhoods; businesses, schools, social service organizations, churches, government operate mostly in their own worlds. Each piece is working hard on its own purpose, but parallel effort added together does not make a community. Our communities are separated into silos; they are a collection of institutions and programs operating near one another but not overlapping or touching. This is important to understand because it is this dividedness that makes it so difficult to create a more positive or alternative future—especially in a culture that is much more interested in individuality and independence than in interdependence. The work is to overcome this fragmentation.

To create the sense that we are safe and among friends, especially those we have not yet met, is a particular challenge for our cities and rural towns. The dominant narrative about our cities is that they are unsafe and troubled. Those we label “homeless,” or “ex-offenders,” or “disabled,” or “at risk” are the most visible people who struggle with belonging, but isolation and apartness is also a wider condition of modern life. This is as true in our gated communities and suburbs as in our urban centers.

There is a particular isolation in the spaciousness and comfort of our suburbs. In these neighborhoods we needed to invent the “play date” for our children. Interaction among kids must be scheduled, much like a business meeting. On Tuesday, a mom must call another mom and ask, “Can Alex play with Phil on Thursday, at our house, say about 4? I will call if we are running late. The play date should last until roughly 5:45, to give both children time to freshen up for the family get-together at dinner.” A far cry from the day of kids walking home after school and casually seeing who they ran into.

The cost of our detachment and disconnection is not only our isolation, our loneliness, but also the fact that there are too many people in our communities whose gifts remain on the margin. Filling the need for belonging is not just a personal struggle for connection, but also a community problem, which is our primary concern in this book. The effects of the fragmentation

of our communities show up in low voter turnout, the struggle to sustain volunteerism, and the large portion of the population who remain disengaged. The struggle is also the reality for the millions of people around the world who are part of today's diaspora—the growing number of displaced people unable to return to their homeland, living and raising their children in a permanent state of transition.

Communities That Work for All

Community offers the promise of belonging and calls for us to acknowledge our interdependence. To belong is to act as an investor, owner, and creator of this place. To be welcome, even if we are strangers. As if we came to the right place and are affirmed for that choice.

To feel a sense of belonging is important because it will lead us from conversations about safety and comfort to other conversations, such as our relatedness and willingness to provide hospitality and generosity. Hospitality is the welcoming of strangers, and generosity is an offer with no expectation of return. These are two elements that we want to nurture as we work to create, strengthen, and restore our communities. This will not occur in a culture dominated by isolation, and its correlate, fear.



It is not my intent here to journalistically describe what healthy communities look like and where they exist. This is well documented. We have the success stories from Savannah, Boston, Chicago, Portland—all those places where community well-being has been on the rise over time. We have the pockets of authentic community in showcase organizational cultures such as Harley-Davidson and AES.

There is no need for more benchmarking of where the world is working. The reason is partly that we have already heard all the stories, and partly—and more important—that narratives of success give us hope and places to visit, but do not build our community. Social fabric and successful communities elsewhere cannot be imported. What works somewhere else ends up as simply another program here, which might be useful but does not shift the fundamentals that we are after.

What is needed is an exploration of the exact way authentic community occurs. How is it transformed? What fundamental shifts are involved? Too little is understood about the creation and transformation of a collective. I want to explore a way of thinking that creates an opening for authentic communities to exist and details what each of us can do to make that happen. The essence is to take a step forward in our thinking and design about the ways that people in communities come together to produce something new for themselves. By thinking in terms of a structure of belonging, we begin to build the capacity to transform our communities into ones that work for all.

The challenge is to think broadly enough to have a theory and methodology that have the power to make a difference, and yet be simple and clear enough to be accessible to anyone who wants to make that difference. We need ideas from a variety of places and disciplines to deal with the complexity of community. Then, acting as if these ideas are true, we must translate them into embarrassingly simple and concrete acts.

This means a shift in thinking that gives us clues about collective possibility. The shift in thinking is the focus of Chapters 1 through 7. Following that, we come to methodology, which many of you may consider the heart of the book. But without the shift in thinking, methodology becomes technique and practice becomes imitation.



One key perspective is that to create a more positive and connected future for our communities, we must be willing to trade their problems for their possibilities. This trade is what is necessary to create a future for our cities and neighborhoods, organizations and institutions—a future that is distinct from the past. Which is the point.

To create an alternative future, we need to advance our understanding of the nature of communal or collective transformation. We know a good deal about individual transformation, but our understanding about the transformation of human systems, such as our workplaces, neighborhoods, and towns, is primitive at best, and too often naive in the belief that if enough individuals awaken, and become intentional and compassionate beings, the shift in community will follow.

A Future Distinct from the Past

The core question, then, is this: What is the means through which those of us who care about the whole community can create a future for ourselves that is not just an improvement, but one of a different nature from what we now have?

The kind of future we are primarily interested in is the way in which communities—whether in the workplace or neighborhood, rural town or urban center—create a wider sense of belonging among their citizens.

This is why we are not focused on individual transformation in this book. Individual transformation is the more popular conversation, and the choice not to focus on it is because we have already learned that the transformation of large numbers of individuals does not result in the transformation of communities. If we continue to invest in individuals as the primary target of change, we will spend our primary energy on this and never fully invest in communities. In this way, individual transformation comes at the cost of community.



The fact that a sense of community has practical importance is probably best established in the work of Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*. He found that community health, educational achievement, local economic strength, and other measures of community well-being were dependent on the level of *social capital* that exists in a community.

Geography, history, great leadership, fine programs, economic advantage, or any other factors that we traditionally use to explain success made a marginal difference in the health of a community. A community's well-being simply had to do with the quality of the relationships, the cohesion that exists among its citizens. He calls this *social capital*.

Social capital is about acting on and valuing our interdependence and sense of belonging. It is the extent to which we extend hospitality and affection to one another. If Putnam is right, to improve the common measures of community health—economy, education, health, safety, the environment—we need to create a community where each citizen has the experience of being connected to those around them and knows that their safety and success are dependent on the success of all others.

This is an important insight for our cities. If you look beneath the surface of even our finest cities and neighborhoods, there is too much suffering. It took the broken levees of Hurricane Katrina to expose to the world the poverty and fragile lives in New Orleans.

A Brief Statement of the Need

I live in Cincinnati, Ohio, which like most of our urban centers can be seen as New Orleans without the flood. While it has abundant assets and irreplaceable qualities, it also has challenges that are impossible to ignore, try as we might. Wherever we live, we are never more than a short ride from neighborhoods that are wounded with disinvested buildings and populated by those who live on the margin. To not see the struggle of those on the margin, to think this is the best of all possible worlds or that we are doing fine, especially if our particular street or neighborhood is safe and prosperous, is to live with blinders on.

We choose to live with blinders for good reason. There is great attraction to the suburban, upscale rural life or to residing in “hot” places. We are constantly reminded of the allure of gated communities, quaint and prosperous small towns, nationally acclaimed golden cities. The streets we most frequently hear about in these areas are clean and busy with pedestrians, their housing a string of jewels, center city vital and alive, and neighborhoods the source of great pride.

These prosperous places, though, are only the partial story. Take it from Jim Keene, a very wise and successful public servant. He has brought his humanity and vision into the cauldron of building community as city manager for Berkeley and Tucson, and now works for an association to build the capacity of other city managers. Jim once said that for every city that prospers, there is another city nearby that is paying the price for that prosperity.

We know we have a shrinking middle class, a growing separation between the well off and the underclass. You cannot look closely at even the great cities in the world without seeing serious underemployment, poverty, homelessness, neighborhoods with empty buildings, deteriorating environment, youth hanging out on street corners day and night, and concerns about public safety.

We know about the dropout rates and deplorable conditions of our urban schools and the difficulty of achieving affordable health care for all. The list goes on. But this is not the point. The question here is not about the nature of the struggles; it is about the nature of the cure.

So the focus in this book is about community transformation; it is about both those communities and places that are paying the price *and* their more prosperous neighbors. For even in prosperous places, the idea and experience of community are elusive. If you look closely, you realize that the social fabric of our culture is more fragile than we imagine.

P A R T O N E

The Fabric of Community

The social fabric of community is formed from an expanding shared sense of belonging. It is shaped by the idea that only when we are connected and care for the well-being of the whole that a civil and democratic society is created. It is like the Bodhisattva belief that not one of us can enter Nirvana until all others have gone before us.

What makes community building so complex is that it occurs in an infinite number of small steps, sometimes in quiet moments that we notice out of the corner of our eye. It calls for us to treat as important many things that we thought were incidental. An after-thought becomes the point; a comment made in passing defines who we are more than all that came before. If the artist is one who captures the nuance of experience, then this is whom each of us must become. The need to see through the eyes of the artist reflects

What is extraordinary appears to us as a habit, the dawn a daily routine of nature.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

the intimate nature of community, even if it is occurring among large groups of people.

The key to creating or transforming community, then, is to see the power in the small but important elements of being with others. The shift we seek needs to be embodied in each invitation we make, each relationship we encounter, and each meeting we attend. For at the most operational and practical level, after all the thinking about policy, strategy, mission, and milestones, it gets down to this: How are we going to be when we gather together?

What this means is that theory devolves down to these everyday questions out of which community is actually lived: Whom do I choose to invite into the room? What is the conversation that I both become and engage in with those people? And when there are more than two of us together at the same time, how do we create a communal structure that moves the action forward?

It is in these kinds of questions that accountability is chosen and care for the well-being of the whole is embodied. Individual transformation is not the point; weaving and strengthening the fabric of community is a collective effort and starts from a shift in our mindset about our connectedness.

this material has been excerpted from

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