

Excerpts from **Community: The Structure of Belonging**, by Peter Block, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008.

Welcome

p. xi 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.

Introduction – The Fragmented Community and Its Transformation

p. 5 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.... 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*.

Part One: The Fabric of Community

Chapter 1 – Insights into Transformation

Chapter 2 – Shifting the Context for Community

p. 29 Community occurs in part as a shift in context, the mental models we bring to our collective efforts.... Context is the set of beliefs, at times ones that we are unaware of, that dictate how we think, how we frame the world, what we pay attention to, and consequently how we behave. It is sometimes called a *worldview*. The following are the shift in context that would signal a transformation into authentic community: p. 30

- We are a community of possibilities, not a community of problems.
- Community exists for the sake of belonging and takes its identity from the gifts, generosity, and accountability of its citizens. It is not defined by its fears, its isolation, or its penchant for retribution.
- We currently have all the capacity, expertise, programs, leaders, regulations, and wealth required to end unnecessary suffering and create an alternative future.

p. 30 This context leads to certain principles of a strategy for community transformation:

- The essential work is to build social fabric, both for its own sake and to enable chosen accountability among citizens....
- Strong associational life is essential and central....
- Citizens who use their power to convene other citizens are what create an alternative future.....
- The small group is the unit of transformation....
- All transformation is linguistic, which means that we can think of community as essentially a conversation.

Chapter 3 – The Stuck Community

p. 37 The overriding characteristic of the stuck community is the decision to broadcast all the reasons we have to be afraid. This is a kind of advertising that exploits the fear we have of violence, of the urban core, of terrorism, of African-Americans and other ethnic groups, of immigrants, of those who are poor or undereducated, of other religions, and of other countries.... p. 38 The marketing of fear is not just for profit; it also holds a political agenda. Fear justifies the retributive agenda, fundamentalist in the extreme, that has been on the rise for some time.

p. 41 The effect of buying in to this view of leadership [*fascination with strong leaders*] is that it lets citizens off the hook and breeds citizen dependency and entitlement. It undermines a culture where each is accountable for their community. The attention on the leader makes good copy, it gives us someone to blame and thereby declares our innocence, but it does not contribute to building community. In its own

way, it reinforces individualism, putting us in the stance of waiting for the cream to rise, wishing for a great individual to bring light where there was darkness.

Chapter 4 – The Restorative Community

p. 48 Restoration begins when we think of community as a possibility, a declaration of the future that we choose to live into.... The communal possibility rotates on the question “What can we create together?” This emerges from the social space we create when we are together.

Chapter 5 – Taking Back Our Projections

p. 58 To continue, as a community, to focus on the needs and deficiencies of the most vulnerable is not an act of hospitality. It substitutes labeling for welcoming. It is isolating in that they become a special category of people, defined by what they cannot do. This isolates the most vulnerable. Despite our care for them, we do not welcome them into our midst, we service them. They become objects. This may be why it is easier to raise money for suffering in distant places or to celebrate the history of slavery’s end than it is to raise money for our neighbors on the margin who are six blocks away. Their proximity stands in the way of our compassion.

p. 60 Restoration and reconciliation begin the moment we take back our projection and reduce the labeling in the name of service.... Communal transformation, taking back our collective projections, occurs when people get connected to those who were previously strangers, and when we invite people into conversations that ask them to act as creators or owners of community.

Chapter 6 – What It Means to Be a Citizen

p. 63 Our definition here is that a citizen is one who is willing to be accountable for and committed to the well-being of the whole. p. 64 When we think of citizens as just voters, we reduce them to being consumers of elected officials and leaders.

Chapter 7 – The Transforming Community

p. 78 The challenge for community building is this: While visions, plans, and committed top leadership are important, even essential, no clear vision, nor detailed plan, nor committed group leaders have the power to bring this image of the future into existence without the continued engagement and involvement of citizens.... What brings a fresh future into being is citizens who are willing to self-organize.

Part Two: The Alchemy of Belonging

Chapter 8 – Leadership is Convening

p. 85 In communal transformation, leadership is about intention, convening, valuing relatedness, and presenting choices. It is not a personality characteristic or a matter of style, and therefore it requires nothing more than what all of us already have.

p. 88 In addition to convening and naming the question, we add listening to the critical role of leadership. Listening may be the single most powerful action the leader can take. Leaders will always be under pressure to speak, but if building social fabric is important, and sustained transformation is the goal, then listening becomes the greater service.

Chapter 9 – The Small Group Is the Unit of Transformation

p. 95 The small group is the structure that allows every voice to be heard. It is in groups of 3 to 12 that intimacy is created. This intimate conversation makes the process personal. It provides the structure where people overcome isolation and where the experience of belonging is created. p. 96 The point is that every large group meeting needs to use small groups to create connection and move the action forward.

Chapter 10 – Questions Are More Transforming Than Answers

p. 103 [I]f you want to change the context, find powerful questions. Questions create the space for something new to emerge. Answers, especially those that respond to our need for quick results, while satisfying, shut down the discussion, and the future shuts down with them.... Powerful questions are those that, in the answering, evoke a choice for accountability and commitment.

p. 106 Here are some questions that have the capacity to open the space for a different future:

- What is the commitment you hold that brought you into this room?
- What is the price you or others pay for being here today?
- How valuable do you plan for this effort to be?

p. 107 Once we have a question, there is a way of setting up the conversation that makes a big difference. Context is decisive at every level.... There are four elements to the setup:

- Name the distinctions.
- Give permission for unpopular answers.
- Avoid advice and replace it with curiosity.
- Precisely name the question.

Chapter 11 – Invitation

p. 118 In addition to stating the reason for the gathering, an invitation at its best must contain a hurdle or demand if accepted. This is not to be inhospitable, but to make even the act of invitation an example of the interdependence we want to experience. So, the invitation is a request not only to show up but to engage.

Chapter 12 – The Possibility, Ownership, Dissent, Commitment, and Gifts Conversations

p. 123 After the invitation, there are five other conversations for structuring belonging: [*potential questions to foster 1) possibility, or statement of a future condition that is beyond reach; 2) ownership - asks citizens to act as if they were creating what exists in the world; 3) the dissent conversation creates an opening for commitment by explicitly asking for doubts and reservations; 4) commitment - a promise with no expectation of return; 5) the gifts conversation is the essence of valuing diversity and inclusion and defining something that each person can bring to the gathering.*]

Chapter 13 – Bringing Hospitality into the World

[*The importance of hospitality: welcome people personally at the door; restate why you are there; create connection between attendees through initial questions, welcome late arrivals, acknowledge early departures, break bread together.*]

Chapter 14 – Designing Physical Space That Supports Community

p. 152 Meeting rooms are traditionally designed for efficiency, control, and business as we know it. p. 153 The task is to rearrange the room to meet our intention to build relatedness, accountability, and commitment... The room needs to express the quality of aliveness and belonging that we wish for the community. [*Ideally, sit in circle with no tables, pick a room with a view, bring in plants, amplify the whole room, choose movable chairs, no stage or raised platforms, bring in art, put life on the wall.*]

Chapter 15 – The End of Unnecessary Suffering

p. 165 [S]hifting our thinking and practice about the politics of experience can achieve reconciliation in several dimensions of community that are the source of so much grief: [*youth, public safety, development and the local economy, family well-being and human services, health care*]. p. 166 If we care about youth instead of trying to control and inculcate them, then we have to deal with our adultism. This means we have to change the nature of our listening. Create places and people that welcome youth, where youth see themselves reflected in those who have chosen to work with them. p. 167 The shift is to realize that safety occurs through neighborhood relatedness. The efforts that move in this direction focus on identifying neighborhood assets. On creating occasions for citizens to know each other through clean-up campaigns, block parties, and citizen activist movements.... p. 168 Reconciliation will occur through a new conversation where the developers talk about the compassion they hold for those on the margin. The new conversation for the social activists is to acknowledge that without some wealth coming into their neighborhoods, they will continue to depopulate and deteriorate.

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