

What Lies beyond Disconnection?

At the root of many of the world's problems is our disconnection from one another and from our natural surroundings. The laundry list of the side effects is long and overwhelming, from severe levels of depression to planetary destruction. Increased polarization is another serious global concern. It does not stop with just political partisanship but is “poisoning everyday interactions and relationships.”¹ This division is a stark account of modern life, and solutions are needed because the consequences of not acting are too serious. Increasingly, people are awakening to the sense that we can no longer stand on the sidelines as spectators consuming the negative side effects of consumer culture.

But what to do?

Answers vary, from protesting intensely so that we may convince our leaders to get their act together, to investing in science and technology so that we can innovate our way out of these global crises. There are many versions of the “protest versus progress” debate and no end of clever suggestions as to how to do each one better and quicker. And though we think both have their place, in the absence of widespread participation at the local level, neither of them convinces us.

Whether dubbed eco-warriors or captains of industry, neither camp will win its crusade alone. The third party, which all too often is forgotten in this equation, is “us” and our local communities.

In this book, we propose a completely different stage on which to take action toward an alternative future. That stage is our neighborhood. Our starting point is not Wall Street, it’s our street.

Our true north is what we term the Connected Community, from which we have drawn the title for this book. We define Connected Communities as places where residents nurture neighborhood relationships that enable people to work together to create a Good Life. This definition contrasts with approaches and outlooks that prioritize relationships outside the neighborhood, that separate neighbors from one another and promote individual survival over community well-being. Such approaches result in disconnected communities.

Our journey, then, is from disconnected to Connected Communities. Although we recognize that the word *community* means many different things, here we are zeroing in on just one definition: a group of people residing in a shared place called a neighborhood. We are using *neighborhood* as a catchall term to speak about all manner of small, bounded geographic communities, including but not exclusive to estates, square mile, block, village, town, favela, or parish. We also acknowledge dispersed communities and people living “off country” and dislocated from their indigenous lands.

What Brought Us to See the Connected Community as the Foundation?

Although we are advocating for grassroots change, we are not promoting an either-or argument of people power versus institutional or political change. We need both. We worry, though, that if we’re waiting for our leaders to get their act together before *we* act, little will change in our lifetime. Change is not about one or the other party solving social and economic problems and other issues of disconnection; it is about making change happen from the inside out, because for most neighborhoods

around the world the cavalry are not coming to save the day, and if they *are* coming, it's to build a strip mall or shopping center.

Nearly thirty years ago, John McKnight, one of the authors of this book, coauthored a book called *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*.² It became affectionately known as "The Green Book." Since its publication in 1993, more than 120,000 copies have been sold, and a further 20,000 have been gifted for free to communities around the world. The Green Book tells the stories of more than three hundred neighborhoods in twenty cities across North America and describes the building blocks that residents in these neighborhoods used in handmade ways to make things better locally. The building blocks they used came to be known as *assets*. Since the publication of that book and the establishment of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute to share the lessons learned from those communities, ABCD approaches have sprung up in many parts of the world. But in truth, all the book does is make visible what regular people do together to create a Good Life. In that sense, ABCD is simply a description of what people have been doing together for generations to make life better.

Three decades on it is clear that the assets featured in *The Green Book* are not unique to North America. They are found in every neighborhood around the world, to one degree or another, if we search them out and lift them up.

When *Building Communities from the Inside Out* was written, more than two decades of massive economic shifts had already blighted many cities in the United States and in other industrialized countries around the world. That trend has continued at pace up to today. Responding to this very real cultural and economic crisis, McKnight and his coauthor, Jody Kretzmann, argued for an alternative path toward a better future for such neighborhoods—a path of capacity-focused development. Policies and activities based on the capacities, skills, and assets of lower-income people and their neighborhoods became the new starting point. At the time, the traditional approach to development was a deficiency model focused exclusively on individual and community needs, deficits, and problems. Although the traditional approach remains dominant and commands the

vast majority of governments' financial and human resources, some amazing green ABCD shoots are blossoming at the edges of various urban and rural neighborhoods around the world.

These outlier neighborhoods are reversing trends toward deficit-driven development and are instead committing themselves to discovering the hidden treasures (capacities and assets) within their communities. Their approach is not, of course, the answer to all of the world's problems; there are no silver bullets here. But their commitment is essential to how we move forward as a species and is therefore foundational in building toward a preferred future together. This book tells their stories.

Neighborhoods as Units of Change

We see the neighborhood as the primary unit of change and as a critical starting point for any serious effort to improve the odds for people who have been dissatisfied with current models of development. For most people we know, ourselves included, making public change happen at world scale is not within reach. Although we know a few people who are doing a wonderful job of making change happen publicly at city or county scale—for example, many major cities around the world are doing excellent community-centered work—for most regular folks, the canvas of a city or county is too big and too remote to create a better life on. That doesn't mean that local efforts can't spread from one neighborhood to others; it simply means that when it comes to widespread participation, it's a good idea to change the world one neighborhood at a time, by finding out what people care about enough to act on close to their own doorsteps.

Discovering Health, Wealth, and Power in Our Neighborhoods

Stand at your window or on the street corner of your block. Survey your neighborhood. What can you see? The fronts of buildings, cars, people, domestic animals, some businesses perhaps?

Now, consider what you can't see: The skills, knowledge, passions, and experiences of neighbors whose names you don't recall or barely know. The informal clubs and groups that you are not a member of. The local institutions that contribute in small but important ways that you never hear about. The physical gems that lay hidden in the built and natural environment, yet to be discovered by you and many of your neighbors. The cultural treasures buried behind invitations you have never received.

You are now imagining the parts of your neighborhood that are currently invisible to you and to most of your neighbors. Although these treasures may be hidden, they are abundantly available because they are close at hand, there for the asking. What you are imagining is the Connected Community, and the health, wealth, and power of your neighborhood.

Health

Robert Putnam, in his groundbreaking publication *Bowling Alone*, notes that "if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half."³ Since his study in the early 2000s, the preponderance of research in other industrialized countries shows his basic findings on the health of Americans holds true around the world but the outlook appears to be getting ever more gloomy. Yes, in industrialized nations there are, in general terms, definite health improvements worth celebrating, but there are also massive disparities in health outcomes for black and brown communities, and increasing numbers of people in consumerist societies are reporting feeling worse than people in their age bracket would have a generation ago. These feelings are closely linked to social disconnectedness in that those who are least connected feel the worst and experience worsening health outcomes as they age.

As a result, more and more industrialized countries are recognizing that loneliness is one of their biggest challenges. Some have gone so far as to appoint government ministers for loneliness. One in five people in Canada is estimated to be lonely, and these figures are broadly on trend with other industrialized countries. A study by researchers at Brigham Young University in 2015 found the ill effects of loneliness are as bad as

smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.⁴ Echoing Putnam's findings, the Brigham study looked at more than three million participants and found that increased social connection is linked to a 50 percent reduced risk of premature death.

Wealth

Many of today's mainstream ideas about wealth have tremendous impact on our personal health and the well-being of local places. They mostly isolate us from one another in order to promote the idea of the "rugged individual" consumer. Modern economies say the following to us:

- Whatever you need can be purchased, including health and security (consumer economy).
- Things are of value only if they can be standardized and mass produced (industrial economy).

Mainstream economics cannot see the contribution potential of the marginalized. It sees people on the margins as broken and deficient, as needy, as not needed. When our money, time, and energy are "invested" in the consumer, industrial, and/or helping economies, we are often left separated from our neighbors and overly dependent on external sources of support at the expense of our neighborhood economies. In other words, investment in things outside our locality is sometimes a form of divestment from our community. It's a net loss. In the name of economic progress, our orthodox economic theories demand that we divest ourselves of time, energy, and creativity in our home community in favor of investing them elsewhere.

By contrast, the examples we share in this book feature the virtues of a neighborhood economy. We share stories about what Zita Cobb and her neighbors achieved on Fogo Island, and what Maria Lai and local villagers gave birth to in Ulassai in Sardinia. Such stories offer us a window into an alternative form of economy, a place-based, rooted economics that treats local culture, local ecology, and community capacities as sacred and as integral to all meaningful progress. In this book you will see that,

contrary to popular opinion, when we shift from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset, it is possible to have our cake and eat it too.

Discovering the Source of Our Power

Who here has the power to make things happen? For many the answer is, *No one here has the power to produce meaningful change; if anything is going to change, it will be because someone from out there (government or its allied institutions) comes to change us. We must therefore use what little local power we do have to get them here.* These words convey the view that we draw our personal sense of power from the quality of the relationship between us and government.⁵ When the relationship is unsatisfactory, people feel a loss of capacity to exert power over their lives and over those who govern them, so they grow apathetic or angry.

This is an interesting argument, with some merit, but it is an institutionalist view of society. There is another way of understanding a person's sense of power.

The anger we observe internationally grows significantly from the dissatisfaction that millions of people feel because they are locally disconnected from one another. In the absence of these connections, the necessary capacities to produce better outcomes in our neighborhoods and present a stronger voice to government fail to take root. The ABCD Institute focuses instead on the tangible local *sources* of power that create a real sense of “agency”—the local relationships that make people feel powerful, connected, and satisfied. This book returns to those sources and invites us to drink deeply. The quality of our shared future depends on it.

For each of the stories that you read in this book, millions more remain untold. These pages seek to honor all those regular folks who show up every day and through modest but consistent practices tap into a new form of power: community power. Community power increases the health, economic viability, care, environmental integrity, and child-raising capacities in neighborhoods and ensures that the fruit of the community's collective labor is supplemented by government supports once their business is done. They do these things without expectation of personal return or

the intention of changing the world. Instead, they are guided and mobilized by a culture of contribution. They continue to be our most authentic teachers and our greatest hope as we chart a course toward an alternative, more satisfying future.

The Voorstad Neighborhood of Deventer, the Netherlands

That is exactly how community-driven change started in the Voorstad neighborhood of Deventer in the Netherlands. One day, Patrick and Leendert were sitting on deck chairs on the brick-paved footpath outside their front doors chatting with each other, as they did most days. The conversation turned to how harsh the environment of the street looked; they felt there were too many bricks and not enough plants and trees to soften the view. So they started digging up some of the bricks—just a few under their windows initially—to reveal the soil underneath. They then used the bricks they had dug up to create a boxlike border around the empty space and filled it with compost and some plants. And just like that they had a mini street garden.

They had no permission to do this and little concern about what, if any, trouble they might get into with city officials. The next day, as they assumed their usual positions on their deck chairs, some of their neighbors gathered to admire the new street garden under their windows. Then a neighbor asked Patrick and Leendert to create a mini street garden for them. Both men were unemployed and had the time to do so; in fact, they were very happy to be asked. It did not take long at all before street gardens began popping up on both sides of their street, compliments of Patrick and Leendert. They barely had time to sit down, but they loved every minute of their newfound roles. Neighbors on other streets heard about the street gardens and requests started pouring in. Soon both men were mentoring others on even more streets on how to create mini street gardens.

One day, while speaking with a lady who was knitting on a chair outside her house, Patrick told her he had seen others also knitting and suggested connecting her with them. She liked the idea and so began the Voorstad knitting club. The members started by knitting scarves for

the community-owned football club called the Go Ahead Eagles, which led to a Guinness World Records attempt to knit a scarf long enough to wrap around the entire neighborhood, as an outward demonstration of the warmth of their community.

Patrick and Leendert met many neighbors with wonderful ideas for improving their neighborhood. They would say things like, “I’d love to do X, if only there were three or four neighbors to help me.” On nearly every occasion, these two amigos knew just the people to connect them with. One day, while speaking with parents about the absence of a playground in the neighborhood, Patrick and Leendert got them involved along with other neighbors in a mini treasure hunt to find an empty lot in the neighborhood. The parents discovered a perfect location and created their own playground, ably decorated with mini gardens.

With hundreds of mini street gardens, a three-kilometers-long long scarf knitted by 185 people and wrapped around the neighborhood, and a playground—all handmade and homespun—it was now clear that something special was stirring up, something bigger than the sum of all these great initiatives: this disconnected neighborhood was becoming a Connected Community; the culture of this place was changing. In addition to individual initiatives springing up, new associations were also forming every other week. Patrick, Leendert, the knitting club, and the playground parents agreed that they would meet together with others from the neighborhood and with neighborhood leaders from the football club (the Go Ahead Eagles).

By the end of a day of storytelling, celebration, and envisioning, a number of new community initiatives had been planned. Two ideas that emerged that day will go down in local lore for many years to come. The first was to establish the Street Gardens Academy and appoint Patrick and Leendert as the directors so that they could feel proud of their achievements up to that point and show that they were authorized by their neighbors to mentor others in creating even more street gardens and playgrounds in the neighborhood. The second idea involved knitting a scarf to wrap around a home allocated in 2015 by a local housing company to a family who had fled Syria following the Syrian civil war that started in 2011.

When asked to explain why they wanted to wrap an entire house in a scarf, one neighbor summed it up as follows: “If we are serious about being a warm neighborhood here in Voorstad, then we must be willing to welcome strangers and be able to demonstrate that; what better way than to wrap the house of our newest neighbors in a scarf with the colors of our community football team, stitched by the hands of hundreds of their new neighbors?”

This book has been written at the feet of people like Patrick and Leendert and their neighbors. Drawing on similar stories from hundreds of neighborhoods in more than fifty countries around the world, we are humbled and privileged to share what they have taught us about the journey from the disconnected neighborhood to the Connected Community.

The Journey Toward the Connected Community: Discover, Connect, Mobilize

We have organized the book to reflect the processes and shifts we have learned about by walking alongside these neighborhood community-building efforts. In line with three stages in a recurring process of change that connecting communities tend to follow—Discover, Connect, and Mobilize—the book is divided into three parts:

Part One: Discover (Chapters 1–3)

Part Two: Connect (Chapters 4–6)

Part Three: Mobilize (Chapters 7–9)

Each part of the book is a gentle call to action. In part 1, the call is to join with your neighbors in discovering what you care about enough to take collective action on, and then in discovering the assets that surround you that can be used in service of shared civic endeavor. The call to action in part 2 is an invitation to positively connect community energy and passions and the various local assets within the neighborhood. In part 3 you are invited to make manifest the assets you have discovered and connected with your neighbors.

Within these three parts, we share nine shifts that we regularly observed in the journey from the disconnected neighborhood to the Connected Community.

Part One: Discover

Chapter 1 is about *shifting our mindset*. In disconnected neighborhoods it is easy to overlook local resources and take the bait of the consumer story: your Good Life is in the marketplace. The Connected Community mindset, by contrast, prompts us to look first to what we already have before seeking external solutions. From there, against the backdrop of the various stresses of modern life, we explore ways of conserving time and energy to discover local possibilities and sustainable livelihoods. We call this process *homecoming*.

Chapter 2 is about *shifting from a deficit-based to an asset-based map*. The deficit-based map portrays the neighborhood as a glass half empty, with too many problems and deficits for local people to start creating a decent life together. By contrast, the asset-based map portrays the neighborhood as a glass half full, with enough assets to begin to create a decent life for everyone in the neighborhood.

Chapter 3 is about, where possible, *shifting to locally sourcing the ingredients we use to produce our well-being in place of pursuing costly, remote, and nonrenewable options*. This approach calls for a shift away from the contributions of individuals outside the neighborhood, remote institutions, external physical and economic exchanges, and consumer culture. We identify in their place six essential building blocks as more sustainable starting points for creating community health, wealth, and power: (1) the contributions of local residents, (2) the resources of local associations, (3) the support of local institutions, (4) the neighborhood's built and natural environments, (5) the local economy, and (6) local stories, shared heritage, and diverse cultural experiences. We recommend these combined building blocks as a first port of call if you are pursuing a satisfying and sustainable life for yourself and those you love.

Part Two: Connect

Chapter 4 is about *shifting away from overreliance on external and internal leaders and toward connectors and the art of connectorship, that is, the art of being a connector*. Traditional views of development place the responsibility for change on the shoulders of leaders. It is commonly assumed in neighborhood planning and development circles that the engagement challenge at hand is (1) to get external leaders to get their act together and/or (2) to find residents with leadership capacity and provide them with the necessary training to improve their personal influence and impact. The traditional battle cry is, *Leaders are the answer*. In shifting toward Connected Communities, the growth challenge, as we understand it, is to broaden local circles of participation and ensure that associational life deepens so that everyone can participate and contribute. Connectors are people essential to this inclusion challenge and to welcoming strangers at the edge. There is no battle cry or crusade here, simply a persistent and genuine invitation. This shift is about connectorship and connectors are vital to this effort.

Chapter 5 is about *shifting away from viewing our neighbors as apathetic about the neighborhood and toward recognizing that they are in fact waiting to be asked to contribute*. Here we push back against claims and generalizations about our neighbors being too selfish, too busy, too stressed, too distracted, or too apathetic to care about their neighbors and neighborhood. Using evidence from our community work, we demonstrate that, generally speaking, the reverse is true, that in fact our neighbors and their associations are more active than any one person can know, and many who are not yet active are waiting to be invited to contribute to the common good.

Chapter 6 is about *shifting away from seeing the underlying purpose of our neighborhoods as being containers of consumption and toward viewing them primarily as units of production and the stages on which local sustainability plays out*. Viewed through the scarcity lens of disconnection, we have no real shared purpose as neighbors. Our primary purpose is to individually consume as much of our natural resources as we can afford,

or to advocate that institutions assume central functions in the areas of health, safety, raising our children, economic and ecological stewardship, care, and production of food regardless of environmental impact.

Viewed through the abundance lens of the Connected Community, our shared purpose as neighbors is to produce the common good by assuming vital functions in the areas of health, safety, raising our children, economic and ecological stewardship, care, and local production of nutritious food.

Part Three: Mobilize

Chapter 7 is about *shifting away from focusing on global crisis and changing the world as your starting point and toward creating change in your own neighborhood with your neighbors*. Chapter 8 is about *shifting away from outside-in planning and service delivery and toward inside-out change and action*. Together these two chapters offer a detailed, practical guide for mobilizing community assets. Here we leave behind old development methods such as finding leaders, doing a needs assessment, writing a planning strategy or funding application, and lobbying for institutional reform. Instead, we show you practical ways of mobilizing within your neighborhood using the following methods: convening a circle of connectors, conducting learning conversations, asset mapping, community building, community dialogues, and parties/celebrations/hosting. These are not binary choices. We are suggesting a shift in starting place that increases morale and creates widespread participation of neighbors.

Chapter 9 is about *shifting neighborhood relationships with outside actors away from wholesale distrust or unhealthy dependence and toward mutual intent and useful alliances that will result in identifying and auditioning what we call Useful Outsiders*. Outside actors can include professionals, elected officials, and various leaders from external institutions who are working with external institutional agendas. Useful Outsiders seek to be of service to community life; they cheer on community alternatives and feature community capacities. They see neighborhoods as creative and productive places. By contrast, Unhelpful Outsiders seek to

recruit clients to their services and programs and see neighborhoods as backwaters of problems and needs.

Nine Keys to the Good Life

At the end of each chapter we offer a key to the Good Life, by which we mean an insight into more satisfying and sustainable ways to achieve well-being. At the end of each of the first two parts of the book we also offer three practical tools you can use to discover and then connect in your neighborhood.

Are We Just Letting Governments off the Hook?

As the authors of this book, we continue to believe in a capacity-oriented, community-driven approach to most social and economic challenges and possibilities, because of everything both of us have seen in our work across thousands of neighborhoods around the world, not to mention our review of the historical record. Both our experience and history confirm that significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort. That is why Connected Communities are never built from the outside in.

But we are still left with the question, *What role do outside institutions play if communities are the primary investors in change?* A follow-up question is, *Are we just letting governments off the hook in terms of their responsibility to serve the public?*

Clearly, valuable outside support and assistance can and should be provided to neighborhoods by various institutions to (1) supplement community capacities, (2) do for communities (in a spirit of service) what they can't do for themselves, and (3) protect communities from outside actors that would do them harm if left to their own devices. We discuss this topic more in later chapters, but for now the point we're making is that when we assume that external institutions have the monopoly on all the best answers to issues of health, wealth, and power, we are heading

toward major disappointment and setting up the professionals who work for those institutions to, at best, fail in our eyes and, at worst, burnout in their jobs. The harsh reality is that for most neighborhoods around the world, especially where inequity and structural racism are felt deepest, collective health, wealth, and power must start from within the community. We argue that this is true for most modern neighborhoods if they are to enjoy satisfying and sustainable outcomes.