

Opening the Neighborhood Treasure Chest

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Thursday, July 23, 2015 -- John McKnight

Curator's Note: Though this article is a few years old now, its message is timeless. And for those of us involved with the Peterborough Dialogues hosted by Axiom News — an experience intended to cultivate community — it has a fresh relevance.

Increasing numbers of Americans are neighborless. They are, in reality, little more than residents occupying a house in an anonymous place. They often admit that they really don't know the people who live around them — except to say hello. It is a regretful admission, but in their view of no more consequence than failing to wash the windows of their house.

Failure to see the costs of not having real neighborhood relationships is the primary cause of our weak local communities. And it is this weakness that is eroding our ability to lead productive, satisfying lives in the 21st century.

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In this century, we have entered an era when neighborhoods must take on significant new functions if our lives are to improve. These are the functions that our large institutions can no longer perform, because they have reached their limits. The medical system no longer has major consequence for our health. Most police leaders understand they have reached the limits of their ability to provide local security. An improved environment will be shaped less by laws than our own local decisions about how we heat, light, transport ourselves, and the amount of waste we create. The majority of our jobs are not going to be provided by large corporate systems. Small business will be the major job source in the future of new enterprise. Our mega-food systems provide high-cost, wastefully transported, chemically grown produce that is slowly being replaced by locally produced and healthful food.

Of even more importance is the obvious limit of trying to pay our institutions to raise our children. Even though we say, "It takes a village to raise a child," we actually outsource most of our child raising. They have become the children of schools, counselors, athletics, youth workers, therapists, McDonald's, the electronic industries and the mall. And we call these villageless children the "youth problem."

For all these reasons, it is now clear that the good life in the 21st century will have to be grown in the local neighborhood. Once we see the need for a strong, connected, productive local community, our basic building blocks are the skills, gifts, passions and knowledge of all our neighbors. It is these neighborly capacities that are most often unknown to us. It is making these capacities visible and connected that is the basic task of a functioning 21st century.

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There are many ways to uncover the productive capacities of a neighborhood. One innovative approach is illustrative of the possibilities.

In a working-class African-American neighborhood in Chicago, the neighborhood organization has initiated discussions at the block level with local residents regarding their gifts, skills, passions and special knowledge. An example of the information they are making visible is what has been found, for instance, about six randomly interviewed residents on one block.

The six people reported sixteen “gifts,” including being good with kids, a good listener, effective organizer and skilled communicator.

Asked about their skills, the six reported fourteen, including knitting, light repairs, real estate law, computers and cooking.

The twenty “passions” the neighbors reported included skating, correcting building problems, decorating, jazz, gardening and photography.

Of special significance for a “village that raises a child” are the fifteen topics the six neighbors said they were willing to teach youngsters or interested adults. They include reading comprehension, computer technology, sewing, first aid, mathematics, skating, cooking, real estate and self-esteem.

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These six residents did not know of most of their neighbor's capacities, though they have lived on the block for some time. And no one had ever asked them about their abilities or whether they would share them.

The neighborhood organization has made the capacities of the neighbors visible. With 30 households on the block, imagine the rich treasures that will be revealed when these "gift" discussions are held with the neighbors in the other 24 households.

It is this hidden treasure chest that can be opened in any neighborhood in North America. Using these treasures requires connecting the capacities of neighbors. And those local neighbors good at organizing are the perfect local connective tissue.

If you are a person who has discovered and connected the productive capacity of your neighbors, we would like to hear from you. And if you are a neighbor interested in initiating the process of opening your neighborhood treasure chest, let us know, and we can share useful materials, and perhaps, connect you to other pioneering neighbors.

This blog was originally posted to [Abundant Community](#). This repost, for which we received permission, follows the style guidelines of the original post.