



THE CONNECTED COMMUNITY

*Discovering the Health,
Wealth, and Power of
Neighborhoods*

CORMAC RUSSELL
JOHN McKNIGHT

Foreword by **PARKER J. PALMER**

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and Power of Neighborhoods*

Cormac Russell

John McKnight



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This book is dedicated to regular folks who have committed themselves to enhancing the common good of their neighborhoods. Thank you for all you do.

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Foreword

Parker J. Palmer

When someone asks where we live, we normally respond by naming a city and perhaps a state or county. If we know and trust that person, we might share our street address.

But if the question goes deeper—“No, really, *where* do you live? Tell me about the community you call home”—and we can’t offer much more than GPS coordinates, is there a *there* there for us? If we don’t have a story to tell about the people and the human and natural history to be found just beyond our front door, do we really *live* there?

Many of us are hard-pressed to provide color commentaries on our own neighborhoods, and for that we pay a price. Our disconnection from “people and place” diminishes our quality of life. It’s one of the root causes of a range of personal and political pathologies in today’s industrialized societies.

Isolation and the loneliness that comes with it lead to illnesses of the mind and body. In an interactive community, where people know enough about one another to notice and care, those maladies would arise less often and be treated sooner when they do. Disconnection also means there’s no “We the People” to shape their collective fate or hold power accountable. Authoritarian rulers work hard to separate people from one another by

fanning the flames of mutual suspicion that burn civic community to the ground, leaving them free to rule as they will.

If these are among the concerns that led you to pick up this book, you were well led. Cormac Russell and John McKnight are leading advocates and practitioners of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), a movement that's been challenging and changing the thinking of everyone who works in the field of community development since 1993, when McKnight and John Kretzmann published the groundbreaking *Building Communities from the Inside Out*.

The ABCD movement is a practical and proven response to the failure of external approaches to community issues: Give the "experts" a lot of money and they will solve problems that ordinary citizens can't solve. As more than a few "urban renewal" efforts show, that arrogant, materialistic top-down approach has led to millions of wasted dollars and more than a few tragic consequences.

Positive and persistent social transformation always involves local residents finding ways to pool and invest their gifts in a common cause. But if that's going to happen, we first need to develop the X-ray vision and imagination that will allow us to see the human gifts that are so often hidden in plain sight. That's where the ABCD approach begins. It then proceeds to strategy and on-the-ground action as people seek to connect with one another, humanize their communities, and democratize their nation.

For me, ABCD's credibility as a movement is enhanced by the fact that it excludes no one in its approach, as illustrated by its work with people with developmental disabilities. McKnight tells a moving story about his friend Pat Worth, who had been labeled "mentally retarded" in his youth and warehoused in an institution. Pat managed to shed that label and escape from that place and build a new life, as he said, "through chance and good fortune."

Eventually, Pat had the vision for People First, which has grown into an international self-advocacy organization for people with disabilities. In Pat's words, "We are not disabled. We are 'dis' but not disabled; we're disconnected. We don't need services, we need community."

The last three words in that powerful statement apply to all of us. But unlike Pat Worth, a lot of us think of ourselves as powerless to do anything about it. We feel trapped by powerful external forces that make disconnection our lot, from segregated neighborhoods to economic forces that deprive us of personal and communal time.

Nothing worthy can happen when we give away our birthright gift of human agency. When we gather with others to build a better life together, whatever agency we have at our command multiplies many times over and builds collective confidence in our capacity to restore our common life. That's where this book can take us, with its well-tested array of tools and strategies for reclaiming and exercising agency in the creation of connected neighborhoods and communities.

This act of recovery begins where all creativity begins: in active imagination. Imagine, for a moment, all that may be hidden in the space beyond your front door. As the authors suggest, that very likely includes the following:

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.

As this book unfolds, it reveals how ordinary folks can make these invisible treasures visible and vibrant for people who live adjacent to one another and want to relate to one another. As example after example shows, once this social capital becomes visible, it can be invested in powerful ways to renew our health, security, care, local economy, ecology, and food sovereignty.

What makes for a thriving nation? That's an urgent question today, when the bodies politic of many nations around the world are clearly in ill-health. The great American poet Walt Whitman had an answer,¹

penned around the start of the American Civil War, when the country's body politic seemed close to taking its last breath:

STATES!

Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?

By an agreement on a paper? Or by arms?

Away!

I arrive, bringing these, beyond all the forces of courts and arms,

These! to hold you together as firmly as the earth itself is held together.

By “These!” Whitman meant the relationships that are forged between neighbors. If we are to thrive as human beings, if democracy is to work as intended, it will depend on what Whitman called “countless linked hands” across our respective lands. This book shows us how to keep working for that democratic vision through connected communities.

Parker J. Palmer is the author of ten books, including *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, and founder of the Center for Courage & Renewal.

He is a former community organizer.

Preface

History teaches us that all sustainable change happens at the grassroots level and then spreads out from there to create further ripples of change. Some of these ripples combine to create big waves; most trigger countless small and unexpected impacts that overlap and intersect in ways we'll never know the full importance of. This book is written in the wake of local ripples made by regular people in their communities using what they have to secure what they need. Their stories largely go untold, because they are modest, and do not feature heroes or Hollywood endings.

There are no stories about great leaders or crusaders in these pages. *The Connected Community* is about places, and about the combined efforts of the people who make them vibrant and are made vibrant by them. It is about neighbors taking responsibility for their local communities so that they and those they love can have a decent life, and so that future generations can expect to do the same.

These community stories have much to teach us about getting better at being human together. The late South African theologian Bishop Desmond Tutu popularized the term *Ubuntu*, which means “a person is a person through other people” or “I am because we are.” Through this word he emphasized a route toward a decent life, or what in this book we refer

to as the *Good Life*, which is about collective effort and cooperation, not individualism and competition. *Ubuntu* is the opposite of the sentiments expressed in the famous Frank Sinatra song “I Did It My Way,” which romanticizes the American idol known as the “rugged individual” or what some call the “self-made person.” Individualism is a superhighway to a sick, depressed, and dissatisfied life and a fragmented society. *Ubuntu*, by contrast, says we are not self-reliant, we are other reliant; that life is not about self-fulfillment and leaning into work and money. Instead, a satisfying life is largely about leaning into our relationships and investing in our communities; it is about interdependence, not independence.

This book aligns with the principles of *Ubuntu*, then goes on to show how we can discover and create *Ubuntu* in everyday life, by making visible, connected, and vibrant the invisible ingredients that surround us, using an approach called Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). By tracing the footsteps of social explorers around the world who have happened upon the Keys to the Good Life, we have made plain a three-stage process for making the journey from disconnected neighborhood to Connected Community. We define these three stages as Discover, Connect, and Mobilize.

In learning from these local community-led change efforts from around the world, we see three simple but incredibly inventive strategies being used (all of which are thoroughly explored in this book):

1. People form connections with their neighbors beyond their workplace, family, and friendship groups, because they know that neighbor-to-neighbor connections matter much more than most people realize.
2. They start addressing problems and possibilities by building on what’s strong and local, not on what’s wrong and external.
3. They view their neighborhoods as primary sites for the Good Life to flourish; in other words, for them, satisfying and sustainable growth is not just about personal development or institutional reform, as commonly assumed, but about the Connected Community and the health, wealth, and power of neighborhoods.

This book offers a window into how to build momentum and widespread participation by starting close to where regular people live their lives. Starting close to people's doorsteps is essential to long-term innovation, sustainable community, and economic development. In *The Connected Community* we see clearly why neighborhoods are the ideal scale at which to address many of the social and economic issues alive in the world today.

So, if you are interested in exploring what happens when residents from neighborhoods around the world discover what they care about enough to act upon it, and how that care ripples outward, then you are going to love this book. The added bonus is that we don't just share a range of inspiring international stories; we also describe in detail the ABCD practices and principles that are instinctively and successfully being used by neighborhood associations to co-produce the Good Life where they live, and to hold outside institutions to account when necessary.

We believe that one of the strengths of this book is the absence of "cookie cutter" or one-size-fits-all solutions. Instead it sticks with real-world practices and insights drawn from neighborhoods that are making lives better together. We invite you to consider whether these approaches are relevant in your context, but more important, to invent responses that best fit your own neighborhood journey. This book is the ultimate sounding board for neighbors building their communities from the inside out, and for those working in neighborhood development who are interested in sustainable, community-driven change.

The Connected Community will exist only when each of us can say of our neighborhood, *Ubuntu*: "I am because we are."

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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, John P. 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