

# Reconnecting the Community

**McKnight, John and Peter Block. *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*. (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2012) 173 pages**

## Review by Juliana Weber

Proposing a partial antidote to consumerism, *The Abundant Community* presents an argument for changing the culture of one's neighborhood to a culture of service and old-fashioned citizenship, the pathway to true community, health, and well-being. McKnight and Block support their theory with statistics as well as practical suggestions on getting started. Those practical suggestions both elucidate the argument and incite the reader to act. Below, I have space only to summarize the bare bones of their argument.

A consumer is "one who has surrendered to others the power to provide what is essential for a full and satisfied life" (7). This includes a surrender of the definition of one's needs, and a consumerist market thrives on creating new needs and fulfilling them—for a price (17). Systems follow the same logic as this consumerist mentality. "What is attractive about systems is that they seem to make the world safer and under control" (29). They offer the predictability and standards of a science experiment (30), but they depersonalize society, encouraging us to wear shoes that do not fit us personally and to buy more of them all the time (35).

The self-organization of communities, by contrast, is always unpredictable and unmanageable, and yet things like potluck dinners still happen (74). Communities, as the authors define them, just focus on gifts rather than needs, and gifts are abundant. Once gifts are disclosed, we have an abundant community, even if some of the dishes requested for the potluck dinner do not arrive. Self-organization is hazardous, not systematic. And yet, we not only have enough, but such a dinner is more meaningful.

Presently, neighbors rarely find out one another's talents; independence has become all-important, necessitating purchases for every need and defining consumers by our ability to purchase. Children are raised by paid experts ranging from teachers to McDonald's, which serve their every need and simultaneously discredit the competency of a village to raise children. It is no wonder, the authors argue, that our children miss sharing "in the wisdom, experience, and loving care of the people in their community" (21). Even our basic ability to care has been outsourced to professionals: We no longer tell our communities about our problems but rather our therapists, as though communities are not competent to care (37). And rather than finding acceptance from a community that values us for our gifts despite our conditions, we pursue more and more cures, constantly unsatisfied with our own selves (38). The market thrives on finding deficiencies in us (43).

Communities, on the other hand, thrive on our "humanity and our personal relationship" (43). Sadly, we no longer hope for support where there aren't price tags, so these marginalized, broken and dysfunctional communities allow individuals to sink into isolation and loneliness experienced at levels and numbers never seen before. We have lost the "space where others have to accept us because we are family or a part of their community", and we have let ourselves become "cases" to be solved (55). The authors

contend, however, that “real satisfaction” is a “collective occurrence” and “can occur only through our relatedness” (57).

What the authors ask of community is “to create conditions where individuals and families can perform certain functions. These functions are to educate a child, [to] sustain a healthy body, [to] have a safe street, [to] participate in a local economy, [to] care for the land, [to] be smart in its relationship to food, and [to] welcome those on the margin” (63). These are the competencies found abundantly in every community, if looked for, and beyond that, every community has its own unique set of gifts.

We will never be satisfied until we realize that we already have enough: abundant gifts in our communities, abundant meaning in our lives, and certainly enough things (70). Capitalism creates prices (not value) and competition based on scarcity, but these authors emphasize: We have enough and we can’t afford not to cooperate—we can’t afford to compete all the time and everywhere (110). Intuitively, people know that “this vision, culture, and commitment [...] have the unique capacity to ensure much of their sense of well-being and happiness. This is the source of satisfaction that is complete in and of itself; it is not dependent on the next purchase” (24). Yet we have trouble living out this vision. On the practical level, all we need is to make our gifts and sorrows explicit within the context of hospitality and establishing a relationship (69).

The authors go into great detail over definitions of kindness, generosity, hospitality and so forth. What I found most intriguing, however, was their treatment of cooperation. Cooperation, the “joy” of women as the authors put it, is what our consumerist culture is so short on (86-87). Competition, on the other hand, something that the authors observe seems to cause men “joy”, is the hallmark of capitalism (87). The authors don’t begin to explore how changing gender roles or women entering the workforce (leaving neighborhoods empty during the day) might relate to this loss. Thus the authors miss the opportunity to place consumerism within a broader historical and sociological context, which would allow for a deeper analysis of the problem.

Apart from this, the authors are very concrete in their diagnosis and treatment of the current problem. For example, they wrap up the book with the key elements of a “connector”, a person who assembles communities and associations. We can all strive to become such persons: gift-centered, well-connected, trusted and trusting, with an eye for putting one neighbor’s gifts together with another neighbor’s need (133-135). Connectors believe that everyone has gifts he or she is waiting to give, thus allowing connectors to overcome fear of rejection (140).

Understanding the human person ensnared by consumerism and helping him free himself: this is the tremendous insight, and the gift that McKnight and Block offer in this book.