
A Basic Guide to ABCD Community Organizing



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The Culture of Community

Every community creates its own culture – the way the community members learn, through time, how to survive and prosper in a particular place. Displaced people lose their culture. But it is also possible to lose a community culture even though you stay in a place. Many people have lost their culture, even though they live in a neighborhood. They occupy an apartment and don't know the people who live around them. Or they may live in a house but their neighbors are strangers to whom they give a smiling nod. These people are not really neighbors in a neighborhood. They are merely residents occupying a building. They have lost their way. They are lonely people depending on malls, schools and cars for survival and the tenuous appearance of prosperity.

How would these lonely people go about creating another way of life, so that they could say, “In this place, we have Our Way? Kin, friends, and neighbors surround us. We are a group of families who have a special kind of relationship. We feel productive, cared for and safe. We have found Our Way.”

Our Way is the culture of community, and something you cannot buy. Nor, can it be created by programs. A culture is the creation of people who are seriously related to each other. It takes time because serious relationships are based upon trust, and trust grows from the experience of being together in ways that make a difference in our lives.

Pioneer Community Building

If we need a community that will make a difference in our lives and we can't buy it or create it through a program, where would we start? It is a great puzzle. And yet the early history of the United States gives us a clear direction to pursue.

The first European pioneers who settled down in a place had a daunting task. Perhaps they were two families with children. They had two covered wagons and oxen to pull them. Inside the wagons were simple tools, a trunk or two, and basic provisions. They were at the beginning of creating a new community. Perhaps, if we understand how they did it, we could see how we could do it, too.

What did they have? There was some land, their tools and themselves. These were the assets they had to create a homestead and, shortly thereafter, a hometown. It would all have to be home made, hand made. And because of that, everything they created was an expression of themselves – their vision, their knowledge, their skills and their limitations. The result was a community in which they had pride, because it was fashioned their way.

This new community was the creation of a group: Mary, Sam and their children and Charles, Abby, their children and Charles' father, Josh. This new community was the

personal creation of these people, their gifts, skills and capacities and their strong relationships that grew as they worked together.

It is our good fortune today that we also have the neighborhood assets of those first settlers: the gifts, skills and capacities of each of the residents, and the power to establish working relationships that also allow us to find our way. So like the pioneers, we start community building in our neighborhood by using our gifts, our skills and our capacities.

The pioneers' process can help guide us. Like us, their families were imperfect, limited people. Sam was given to too much drink. Mary was six months pregnant, their oldest boy, John, had a shriveled left leg from birth. The younger boy, Peter, they called "slow." He would never learn to read or count money.

Charles had lost his right arm in a mill accident back where they came from. Abby was a bitter person. Their teenage daughter, Jane, often drifted away in her mind and forgot what she was doing. Charles' father, Josh, had a hard time walking.

These were the people who created a homestead and a hometown. They each had clear problems, limitations and dilemmas. But they had a clear priority: we must create a community. And so it was that they set aside their limits and focused instead upon their capacities.

Sam knew carpentry. Mary knew weaving from childhood. John was a tireless worker in spite of his heavy limp. And little Peter loved tools. Charles could do any kind of ironwork and was a crack shot. Abby knew the Bible by heart and could preserve any kind of food. Jane sang beautifully and loved to make a garden. And old Josh had a mind full of know-how about nearly everything.

They built their community by recognizing every capacity of everyone and using them to make a new way. They also set their needs, problems and deficiencies aside.

This is the same reality that is true anywhere in the world where communities grow. Communities are built on the gifts, skills and capacities of people who also have deficits and needs. But the unique pioneer insight is that you couldn't build a community with needs. Communities are built with the gifts of its members.

Community Begins With Gifts

So the community beginning is to recognize the gifts of everyone in the neighborhood – the families, the young people, the old people, the vulnerable people, the troublesome people. Everyone. Consider the possibilities. Which of your neighbors have these gifts?

- Carpentry
- Writing poetry
- Driving a truck
- Game playing: chess, backgammon, etc.
- Organizing ability
- Singing
- Wallpapering
- Storytelling
- Care of children
- Accounting
- Soccer
- Internet knowledge
- Listening
- Math
- Auto repair
- Airplane flying
- Gardening
- Entrepreneurial abilities
- Hair cutting
- Filmmaking
- Peace making
- Praying
- Knowledge of environment
- House painting
- Bartending
- Repairing things
- Art –ceramics, painting, jewelry, sculpture, graphic design, other
- Writing
- Pruning trees
- Electrical work
- Cooking
- Caring for the old, disabled and / or ill
- Family nurturing
- Motorcycling
- Playing musical instruments
- Debating
- Knowledge of “wellness” – Exercise, nutrition, resources

Gifts Create Possibilities

If you and the other neighbors know of each other's gifts, new community possibilities emerge. The neighbors could:

- Create neighborhood forums
- Build a clubhouse
- Create a neighborhood choir or a band
- Have young people teach the Internet to seniors
- Repair some older houses
- Organize a learning exchange for exchanging skills from haircutting to wall papering
- Teach each other and young people painting, writing, poetry, storytelling
- Learn from the peacemakers how to ease our family and neighborhood quarrels.
- Have broken things repaired instead of making more waste.
- Have neighborhood hikes, parties and trips.
- Create neighborhood sports teams.
- At neighborhood forums, ask our listeners to help us know what we said and our organizers to help us decide to work effectively toward our vision.
- Ask chess players and debaters to teach our children these wonderful learning skills
- Create a neighborhood flag, and each household creates their own flag after learning how from the people who sew.
- Have story telling evenings to learn the story of each family.
- Exchange childcare
- Write a tutor list so our children can have special help learning about the hundreds of things the neighbors know.
- If we have professional neighbors – our nurses, engineers, teachers, etc.–they could inform us at our forums about what they know that we need to know, “decoding” their trades.
- Have monthly potluck dinners, where we sing together and urge our children to share their gifts with the adults.
- Conduct an inventory of the jobs of each neighbor, and then connect our teens to people with interesting jobs so they can learn what they do and how to prepare for a vocation.
- On a neighborhood website bulletin board, neighbors can post job openings that are available in their workplaces. Identify the neighborhood entrepreneurs and convene them to sharing insights. They can offer advice to neighbors who want to start a business.
- At the neighborhood forum, invite local business people to make presentations and then develop a neighborhood compact to support the local businesses as well as new entrepreneurs from the neighborhood.
- Share transportation to work; carpool with neighbors to schools, activities.

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- Create mutual support groups for single parents, bereaved neighbors, parents of teenagers and any other situation where the wisdom of common experience can help us make our way.
 - Exchange children's clothes.
 - Hold a forum on neighborhood security, where participants pledge to support doable actions rather than merely complain.

Now we are on our way to creating a culture of community. By recognizing our individual gifts, capacities and skills, we can see that the neighborhood is a treasure chest. By putting the gifts together in many different ways, we open the chest and use its riches.

The Power of Our Gifts

In the process, we have discovered several things. First, working together we have begun to take creative responsibility for our families and our lives. We have begun to make our neighborhood safer, healthier, wiser, and richer and a much better place to raise a family. Instead of feeling alone and overwhelmed by our family dilemmas, we began to connect other parents, children, youth and seniors by extending our families. We have felt the comfort, help, pleasure and tangible support from those surrounding us.

Second, as we invented Our Way, all kinds of new connections and relationships were created. We crossed lines once drawn between youth and adults, parents and children, seniors and juniors, the frail and the able. We are becoming a community: a group of specially related people.

Third, we have begun to understand the limits of money. Our community inventions usually cost little to nothing, and yet they become a treasure. We see that you can't buy more safety, health, wisdom or wealth. But together we can create them. We feel less burdened financially and less dependent on outside institutions. We were finding Our Way.

Fourth, as we created together, we found a new kind of trust emerging. Our neighbors became people we could count on. And they would count on us. There was a profound sense of security that began to emerge.

Fifth, we began to feel powerful. We had found our own way, and that sense of power led us to hold celebrations, acclaiming our successes while recognizing our frailties and those among us who passed away.

Finally, we have begun to create a history together. We could say, "We know how to join in educating our children. We learned how. We found Our Way, and we would love to share it with your neighborhood because we also can learn from your way."

A competent community builds on the gifts of its people. But it also knows that a gift isn't a gift until it is given. Before the giving, it is only a beautifully wrapped box in a drawer. It needs to be connected to a Birthday person before it is really a gift.

Connected Gifts Create Associations

This is also true of the gifts of neighbors. They become useful when they are connected to someone else. It is that kind of connecting that is the key to Our Way.

These connections have many benefits:

- ...the giver sees his own value in the appreciation of the receiver.
- ...the receiver sees the value of the giver in the gift.
- ...the community becomes more valuable as the value of the gift is shared to benefit others.

There is, however, a common dilemma in many neighborhoods. People and their gifts are not connected. The neighborhood is filled with isolated people and families living alone. Who or what will initiate the connections in our neighborhood?

Here, we can return to the pioneer families and see how they proceeded.

As soon as there were enough new settlers around the original families, they all gathered together in small groups to undertake tasks a family couldn't accomplish on its own. Several families shared their labor, pulling stumps and raising barns. Homemakers joined together to share information on weaving, gardening and cooking. Farmers joined in sharing information about the best way to grow crops on this new land. Many parents created a group to locate and start a new school.

Other families of the same faith joined together for weekly worship. Some musical people joined together and created a choir.

Whatever vision they had or necessity they felt, a small group was created to bring it to life. And it was through the formation of these small groups that a community was created. Because of their joint efforts, a culture was created and they called it Our Way.

A brilliant observer of how North American communities were actually created was a young French count named Alexis De Tocqueville. In 1831, he traveled to cities, towns, villages and settlements in Canada, the East, Midwest and South. He was amazed to see how communities were created anew on prairies and in forests. He concluded that the key to those community creations was the hundreds of small groups that the pioneers formed. They were the essential building blocks of pioneer Americans and Canadians.

When Tocqueville returned to France, he wrote a brilliant report on the new-world community building process that he had observed. He titled it “Democracy in America” and focused especially on the small groups of newly connected neighbors. He named these groups “associations.” They were the small, face-to-face groups of local people who took on thousands of missions—and they were not paid.

He reported, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have...associations of a thousand kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.”

And he concludes that, “Nothing, in my opinion, is more deserving of our attention than the intellectual and moral associations (of North America). We understand them imperfectly because we have hardly ever seen anything of the kind. In democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science; the progress of all the rest depends upon the progress it has made. Among the laws that rule human societies there is one, which seems to be more precise and clear than all the others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.” (Book 2, Chapter 5)

The Power of Associations

Tocqueville observed that associational life was unique to North America –the new tool for building both community and democracy. And he was one of the first to recognize that our associations were central to our democracy. Voting, he observed, is vital, but it is the power to give your power away, i.e., to delegate your will to a representative. An association, on the other hand, is a means to make power rather than giving it away. This new associational tool involved using these community powers:

....The power to decide what needs to be done. This power is not delegated to experts. It is based upon the belief that 18 local citizens, connected together, have the special ability to know what needs doing in their community.

....The power to decide how we could do what needs to be done. Here again, local knowledge is the basic expertise.

....The power to join with their neighbors to do what needs to be done.

The association is the tool to produce the future. A citizen is a person with the awesome power to determine and create a common future. And so it is that the association makes citizenship possible. It empowers us because neighbors can decide what needs to be done, how it can be done and of greatest importance, they are the people who can do it. In associations we are not consumers. We are not clients. We are citizens with the power to make powerful communities.

Associations Today

It has been nearly 2 centuries since Tocqueville discovered the unique associational heart of North American communities. And it is our good fortune that we are still the earth's most associational people. If each of our neighbors would itemize the associations he or she belongs to or participates in, we would probably find that we would have a list of 50 – 100 groups. And as Tocqueville noted, they would be groups of every kind. A list of the kinds of community associations neighbors are typically involved in include:

Addiction Prevention and Recovery Groups

- Testimonial Group for Addicts
- Campaign for a Drug Free Neighborhood

Advisory Community Support Groups (friends of...)

- Friends of the Library
- Neighborhood Park Advisory Council

Animal Care Groups

- Conservation Association
- Humane Society

Anti Crime Groups

- Children's Safe Haven Neighborhood Group
- Senior Safety Group

Business Organizations/Support Groups

- Jaycees
- Economic Development Council

Charitable Groups and Drives

- Local Hospital Auxiliary
- Local United Way

Civic Events Groups

- Committees to celebrate holidays
- Health Fair Committee

Cultural Groups

- Community Choir
- Drama Club

Disability / Special Needs Groups

Parents of Disabled Children
Local Mental Health Association

Education Groups

Local Book Clubs
Parent Teacher Association

Elderly Groups

Retired Executives Club
Church Seniors Club

Environmental Groups

Neighborhood Recycling Club
Save the Park Committee

Family Support Groups

Teen Parent Organization
Parent Alliance Group

Health Advocacy & Fitness Groups

Neighborhood Health Council
Senior Fitness Club

Heritage Groups

Neighborhood Historical Society
Ethnic Heritage Association

Hobby and Collectors Groups

Arts and Crafts Club
Garden Club of Neighbors

Men's Groups

Church Men's Organizations
Men's Sports Organizations

Mentoring Groups

After School Mentors
Church Mentoring Group

Mutual Support Groups

La Leche League
Family-to-Family Groups

Neighborhood Improvement Groups

Council of Block Clubs
Neighborhood Anti-Crime Council

Political Organizations

Democratic Club
Republican Club

Recreation Groups

Bowling Leagues
Little League

Religious Groups

- Churches
- Mosques
- Temples

Resident's Association

- Block Clubs
- Tenant Association

Service Clubs

- Zonta
- Rotary Clubs

Social Groups

- Card Playing Club
- Dance Clubs

Social Cause/Advocacy Issue Group

- Community Action Council
- Soup Kitchen Group

Union Groups

- Industrial (UAW)
- Craft Unions (Plumbing Council)

Veteran's Groups

- Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)
- Women's Veterans Organizations

Women's Groups

- Women's Sports Groups
- Eastern Star

Youth Groups

- 4-H
- Teen Leadership Club

Associations Are the Workhorses of Communities

In addition to the gifts and skills of local residents, associations like these are the second major tool available for community building. They have three major roles in helping us on Our Way.

First, many are engaged in work that strengthens community life. For example:

- ...The Parents of Disabled Children are broadening the opportunities for all children to learn and play together.

- ...The neighborhood Park Council is guiding the local park manager in developing the park to engage the diverse interests of local residents

...The Drama Club is involving neighbors in theater and entertaining the neighborhood.

...The Seniors Club is involving local school children in their inter-generational initiative.

...The Garden Club has transformed the vacant lot into a refreshing green space.

...The Softball League has a project to mentor local youth.

...The Veteran's of Foreign Wars are organizing the annual patriotic celebration.

Indeed, every local association is strengthening the local community by bringing neighbors together to use their powers as citizens.

Second, many associations often take on new community roles that reach beyond their primary function. One of the most exemplary is a national organization of local motorcycle clubs called Bikers Against Child Abuse (www.bacausa.com). Certainly none of the motorcycle clubs were formed to deal with child abuse, but many have adopted this community function in addition to their primary functions

We see this broadening of functions in many groups:

- The Lions Club collects used glasses for use in less-privileged communities.
- The local union collects toys each year from its members to give to neighborhood children.
- The Westside Seniors Club creates a literacy initiative to assist immigrant neighbors.
- The Drama Club produces a play for local residents that advocates recycling and other “green” practices at home.
- Several bowling leagues raise money to equip a new neighborhood “tot lot.”
- The Garden Club, following the vision of two members, creates a family movie night in the local park.
- A local political club sponsors a monthly children's clothing exchange for the neighborhood.

So, if we look beyond the association's name, we will see that many are involved in all kinds of additional activities that produce a significant community benefit. In fact, if we identified all the associations our neighbors are involved in and identified the basic functions of these groups as well as the additional community benefit activities, we would uncover the same foundation of our community that Tocqueville found in 1831.

There is a third way many associations strengthen their local community. This occurs when many of them join together to create a neighborhood association to improve the lives of all the residents. These “associations of associations” have proven to be the most powerful tool for making Our Way. The reason is clear. Every association is empowering and powerful, because it acts as the amplifier of the gifts, skills and talents of each member. It is the principal community means helping people to give their gifts. It is the community connector that joins our talents so each member is much more powerful than when acting alone.

As each association makes its members more powerful, in the same way, an association of associations greatly amplifies the power of each association, which makes each individual member more powerful in turn.

Community is a word meaning “people in relationship.” Association is a word meaning “people in powerful relationships.” A powerful community finds its own way through ever increasing connections of people who exercise their right to freedom of association in order to create a better future together.

If we understand the potential place of associations in community building, how can we use this knowledge to move ahead toward making Our Way?

The Vital Role of Connectors

The basic tool for community building with the gifts of individuals and the power of associations is making connections. The gifts of individuals become valuable when they are connected to someone. Associations become powerful when they connect the gifts of many individuals. Associations become even more powerful when they are connected to other associations.

Finding Our Way depends on initiatives that result in more individual connections and more associational connections. So the basic question is how to multiply the same connections that pioneers used to create new communities. Who are the 21st century connectors?

What about you? You are as likely as any other neighbor to be a connector or have the potential to become one. However, you can't pay for a degree in Community Connecting. It is a skill often underused, undeveloped or unrecognized. But it is a natural

skill and abundant in every neighborhood. The key to finding Our Way is enhancing a spirit and culture of connecting.

So, who are the proven connectors of your acquaintance? Who sees the gifts of local people and figures out ways to share them? Who do people turn to when something needs to be done on the block? Who are the people who take responsibility for civic events? Who are the leaders of your local associations? Who took the initiative to create a new neighborhood group to solve a problem or carry out a vision?

These are the proven connectors. Some may be called leaders. Most will not, because compared to a leader, a connector has a very different role in the community. A leader is a person at the front of the room who acts as a voice for the community. A connector is in the center of the room, often unrecognized but always creating new relationships often acting in a modest way.

Connectors have certain characteristics in common:

- They are “gift-centered” people. They see the “full half” in everyone.
- They are well connected themselves, active in associational and civic life. They know the ways of their neighborhood.
- They are trusted and create new trusting relationships. The trust they have grows from the fact that they see the gift of their neighbors, and they are willing contributors to their neighbors and the neighborhood.
- They believe in the people in their community. They are not cynical, doubting observers of local residents. They know that their community is a place rich in resources.
- And they are people who get joy from connecting, convening and inviting people to come together. They are not seeking to lead people. They know the power in joining people together.

When you think of your neighborhood, who are the connectors?

A Table for Connectors

One starting place for finding Our Way is to invite the local connectors to come together and share their successes and ideas by forming a Connector's Table. They could then discuss what new connections of neighbors and associations would make a better neighborhood? Who are the people with connector potential who could be invited to join the Table? Are there senior connectors at the Table? Are there teen connectors involved?

This core group could become initiators of a new community culture as they consciously pursue the connective possibilities they envision.

They could begin to identify the gifts and skills of all the neighbors –the gold in the community treasure chest. There are 4 simple questions they can ask each neighbor as they identify the neighborhood treasures.

1. What are your gifts of the head? What do you especially know about – birds, mathematics, neighborhood history, etc. ?
2. What are your gifts of the hands? What do you know about doing things– baseball, carpentry, cooking, guitar, etc.?
3. What are your gifts of the heart? What do you especially care about–children, environment, veterans, politics, etc.?
4. What clubs, groups and associations do you and your family belong to or participate in?

These gifts are the neighborhood treasures waiting to be given.

Connecting Individual Gifts

The Connector's Table can begin to see how these gifts of head, hand and heart can be connected in new relationships. They will learn that:

...Charles knows how to juggle. Who are the neighborhood kids who would love to learn from him?

...Sue, Mary, Charlene and Diane all have young children and are willing to swap baby sitting. They don't know each other so we can connect the four of them.

...There are twenty-two people who play musical instruments –alone. They can be connected to start a band–maybe two.

...Seven people care especially about the environment. Connected, they could develop a plan to engage the neighbors in renewing the deteriorated local park.

...Eleven people say they know how to start a business. They can be introduced to Sam, Sarah and Joan who say they want to start a business.

...Jane, Nancy and Sylvester care about health. They can be connected to create a healthy neighborhood initiative.

...Twenty-nine people have all kinds of skills relating to home maintenance and repair. They can become a neighborhood home adviser group, available when neighbors need advice on their houses.

Connecting Associations

As the Table members make these connections, they are often creating new associations. Because of their inventory, they also know the names of the associations with which the neighbors are active. There will be more than anyone in the neighborhood imagined.

This associational treasure chest provides the Connector's Table with many new possibilities:

First, they can see which residents might be connected to the existing associations. If there are 4 choirs, which people who like to sing can be connected to them? Which teenagers can be connected to associations of adults so they can learn the way of community and citizenship? The young people could become participating members of environmental groups, drama clubs, hobby groups, men's and women's organizations, neighborhood block clubs, bowling leagues, etc.

Second, appropriate associations can be connected to the newly connected neighbors. For example, if the new environmental group focuses on park renewal, they could be joined or assisted by men and women's groups, faith groups, the neighborhood historical society and the fitness groups.

Third, if the neighborhood focuses on any issue or vision, all the associations can be first notified (electronically) and asked if they wish to participate. Which associations will help with holiday celebration or the neighborhood picnic? We want a new clubhouse in the park. Which associations will help raise the money? Which will help build it?

Fourth, and perhaps of greatest importance, the members of the Connectors Table can meet with the president or chairperson of each association and find out:

1. What community benefit activities the association is presently engaged in.
2. What kinds of new neighborhood initiatives would their membership be willing to join? Would they help with efforts to improve health, safety, youth, the environment, etc.?
3. Would they be willing to join with all the other local groups in creating a new neighborhood "association of associations" to make the new neighborhood a great place to live and raise families?

The answer to this last question is most important of all. For an “association of associations” is the most a powerful force for creating a new neighborhood vision and finding Our Way. While each association has a particular focus that is usually not the neighborhood, in an “association of associations,” each group adds its power to the vision of a better neighborhood. In this way, disconnected associations of diverse interests become the unified neighborhood force for a new way for citizens to produce their own future.

The Connectors Table has been transforming because it has initiated new relationships between individual neighbors, between neighbors and associations and between associations. Each connection is an asset that has been invested through connections. And the sum of the connections is a community wealthy in security, health, wisdom and enterprise.

What About Outsiders?

There is, however, one dilemma that faces even neighborhoods with a wealth of invested gifts and transformed associations. It is the dilemma of the outsider –the outsider in the neighborhood and the outsider outside the neighborhood.

Usually, the outsiders inside the neighborhood are the people who have names that tell about their problem. Remember the pioneer families? Sam, a father, drank too much. Mary was pregnant. Their boy John was born disabled with a shriveled leg. And his brother Peter was “slow” to learn and never did learn to read. Charles, the father of the other family had one arm. His wife was a mentally troubled person. Their daughter Joan was mentally fragile, too. And Charles’ father was feeble and found it hard to walk

But each of them also had gifts, capacities and skills. They used them to create the community where you now live –in spite of their deficits, needs and problems.

The same is true of our own neighborhood. While we all have deficiencies and problems, some of our neighbors get labeled by their deficiencies or condition. They are given names like mentally ill, physically disabled, developmentally disabled, youth-at-risk, single moms, welfare recipients, people in the trailer court, immigrants. All of these people have gifts we need for a really strong community. And many of them desperately need to be asked to join and contribute. Their greatest deficiency is the lack of connection to the rest of us.

And our greatest community weakness is the fact that we haven't seen them and felt their loneliness. We have often ignored or even feared them. And yet they are our greatest undiscovered treasure!

Therefore, the Connectors Table needs to be especially focused on the people at the edge, the people with the names that describe their empty half rather than their gifted

full half. The connectors are motivated by the fact that historically, every great local community has engaged the talents of every single member. For the strongest our neighborhood can possibly be is as powerful as we will be when we all give all our gifts.

This means that the key words for our community are invitation, participation and connection. Our connectors will be great inviters, like a host or hostess, opening the door to our community life. Their goal will be to have everyone participating, giving and receiving gifts. And their method will be connection –introducing the newly discovered gifts to the other neighbors and associations.

The great Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, wrote a line in a poem that guides the Connectors. Speaking of a local community, he wrote, “There are no strangers here, just friends we haven't met.” So perhaps the best description of a real neighborhood, a powerful neighborhood, a great community is one that is filled with friends. We have all met and shared our gifts and associations.

Outsiders Beyond our Community Borders

What about the outsider outside our community? The foreigner who lives on the other side of Halsted Street, the boundary of our neighborhood, or the person outside the neighborhood who prays on a rug 5 times a day, or the outsider who lives in a neighborhood where people park their cars on the lawn and repair them on the street, or the rich man who doesn't want to live among us.

The truth is that every local community of any kind is a group of specially connected people. But the very fact of their special connection necessarily creates outsiders. An association of Labrador Retriever owners, without intention, makes outsiders of Poodle owners. And every neighborhood necessarily creates outsiders by establishing boundaries. The question is, what kind of boundary is it? Is it a boundary of superiority and exclusion, a dangerous place to approach? Or is it the edge of a place that has a welcome at the door?

There is a name for this welcome at the door –hospitality. Hospitality is the ability to welcome a stranger. This welcome is the sign of a confident community. It has nothing to fear from the outsider. The outsider has gifts, insights and experiences to share for our benefit.

A confident community has found its way. It looks forward to sharing Our Way with others. “Come on in. What would you like to eat? We have a great community band we want you to hear. And let us show you our new park that we created ourselves.”

The beautiful, remarkable sign of a secure community is that it has a welcome at the edge. And whom better than the Connectors Table to remind us, should we forget, that

there are important connections to be made beyond our borders? For beyond them are people who need our gifts, as we need theirs.

The only thing we have to fear in our community is fear of outsiders.

Community Building Questions

Creating a community culture often requires neighbors to begin by asking some new questions. A few of these pioneering questions that can spark a community vision are:

1. What are the gifts of the people in the neighborhood and how are they given?
2. Where are the places in our community where people gather or could gather if a welcome was offered?
3. What do people in this neighborhood create together?
4. What are the reasons that have gotten neighbors together?
5. What is it in this neighborhood that creates community and how did that happen? Who was involved?
6. How does our neighborhood show that we care about each other?
7. What do we do to help keep our streets clean?
8. Where do we spend money that stays in the community, and what more can we do to keep our money local?
9. What does our community do to provide learning opportunities for our children (aside from the school or more professional services)?
10. How do we show our neighborhood children how to be effective citizens?
11. What do we do that involves youth, our older people, and strangers of all kinds?

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12. Who are the neighbors who:
 - are the creative, gifted storytellers?
 - have a great sense of humor?
 - have huge amounts of positive energy?
 - have the most generous smiles?
 - are the natural teachers and guides?
 - are the kindest?
 - And how can we learn from these people and connect them to our strangers and youth.

 13. What local problems are probably un-solvable? How do we recognize these dilemmas and join each other in dealing with limits, tragedy and death?

 14. What would this community be like if we were satisfied neighbors rather than frustrated residents?

 15. What would have to happen here for our lives to feel gratifying?

 16. How would we know what is enough?

The Signs That We Have Found Our Way

A community that has found its way is nonetheless always on its way. It has an anchor and it has sails –a history and a dream. But it is finally lived by each one of us. When we have found Our Way, we will know we are going the right way because:

- Everything is personal. The neighbors know me by name.
- I am valued. It is recognized that I have gifts to offer the community.
- There are opportunities for my gifts to be given.
- There is informality to Our Way. Order exists, but it is not rigid and allows for my uniqueness.
- There is creativity and spontaneity. There are opportunities for singing, celebration and eating together.
- Invention abounds.
- There is tragedy, and it is acknowledged that tragedy is a part of life. So we mourn and move on together, always finding Our Way.