Wayne Hurlbert: In The Abundant Community, Awakening the Power of Families and
Neighborhoods, Peter Block and John McKnight This book describes the
invisible but immeasurable impact that consumerism has had on families and
communities.
Purchases of essential products are made from outside the community, and
services and necessities of life are often outsourced. Because people look
outside of their own circle of friends and neighbors for products and services,
and the satisfaction they see, they think of themselves as consumers, and not
as citizens or members of local communities. The authors offer an alternative
concept for creating a satisfying life, and they share the possibility that result
from forming a community that nurtures the families as citizens.
*Wayne Hurlbert Introduction to webinar*

Mr. Hurlbert: What was the background to writing this book The     Abundant Community?

*Background.* The authors come from different worlds. John has spent his life
trying to understand communities and what they are good for, what they are
useful for. And Peter tries to understand systems, and has tried to document
and imagine ways to humanize them. Their thinking intersects at the point
where we realize that the system world has reached its limit.

*Reform.* When you come to this realization, it becomes clear that all the efforts to
achieve education reform, healthcare reform, government reform, economic
reform, fiscal reform, are missing the point. They are destined to produce
nothing new for those that have become dependent on them.

Systems are not amenable to reform. You can reconfigure them all you want,
cut costs, merge, roll out new missions and vision, but this will not produce
reform. It will make them more efficient, help them survive, but not reform. This
is looking for reform in all the wrong places. It is the space outside systems in
neighborhoods and families some call civic space, where reform can occur. This
is where there is a possibility to take back and produce the kind of life we want,
because systems have reached their limit.

*System Limits.* The book is not really a critique of systems, but to say that
systems cannot raise a child, they cannot keep us safe, they cannot create a
local economy, they cannot take care of the people on the margins, they can't
take care of the land. And so if we keep looking to systems for what is really in
our hands, then we are going to be eternally frustrated.

The challenge for us is to say that well, if systems cannot raise a child, who
can? How do we give some thought and form and affirmation to the fact that a
child needs to be raised by a neighborhood? I am safe because a neighborhood

keeps me safe, not the police. I am healthy because of my own habits and the people around me, not the medical
Industrial complex. For elders, those on the margin, the disabled, and people recovering from mental illness; the care they need is from friends, not from professionals.

*Economics*: Another way of casting it is that economics, the mode by which systems operate, is the study of scarce resources. This is different from a study of abundance. There is a whole sector in everybody's life, a whole domain in our relationships and our community where what one needs for satisfaction is abundant. That which is not scarce is outside of the world of economics and the systems it has produced.

Authentic reform begins the moment we recognize the abundance in our communities and mobilize to let that abundance flow again because what stops the flow is the idea of scarcity. We are wedded to scarcity economics, and every bit of news about the future of our wellbeing in the western world has to do with what's happening economically in the financial markets, international trading the GNP.

That world functions well for what it is designed to do, which is to establish wealth and spur productivity. At the same time it is just that world that has, by its nature, created such disparity in the world.

By exalting and romanticizing the scarcity economics and the system way, we ignore the world of abundance. We relegate to human interest, psychology and the domain of spirituality the study of those things such as our gifts, our capacities, our abilities, our interests, our passions, our associations, our neighbors, our generosity and our capacity to care. These are the functions that we can put together in a way that economic world can't.

*Care vs. Service:* What this takes is a neighborhood. If we step back think about it a bit, we will recognize this. One of the ways of thinking about it, is to acknowledge the fact that people want to be cared for, they want to take care of each other. The world of care is a world of abundance. I can care for all my neighbors, I can care for all my family.

However, there is a substitute for care, it is called service. That's to seek someone that I will pay in lieu of care. I don't believe I can take care of my children, so I pay for people to provide that service. They call themselves care providers, but they aren't. They are professionals getting paid to intervene in peoples lives. They replace the world of community and primary relationships where care prevails, with service.

One of the narratives of the modern society is that people don't care for each other, they don't take care of each other, we have evolved away from care into service. There is evidence of this: we have created large numbers of nursing homes more and more schools and youth programs. We demand more police and correctional facilities. We have abandoned what we have in abundance for that which is scarce. Reforming nursing homes and police will not produce better outcomes. It is really a distraction from building stronger neighborhoods and citizen capacities.

*Neighborhood Functions.* Too many of us are rather isolated from our neighbors. So what the community could provide, is neighbors who care for our children. They can know who my children are. If my children wander farther than

one block from my house, there might be people that know my child and if the child does something wrong they say, stop that; and they don't worry about a lawsuit. The point is that neighborhoods can keep us safe. We can know each other and feel free to make requests of each other. We can know each others gifts and passions. Most of this does not exist in our modern neighborhoods.

Neighbors now are people who live nearby; they are not people who I depend on to help me do things that are most satisfying about life. In the United States, most neighborhoods have been emotionally vacated. If you ask most people, where do you find your social connections and support for what matters to you? They say, well, I get in my car to find it. I get it electronically. We have lost a walking distance experience of what it takes to raise a child, care for those on the margins and be safe. To care for each other.

If the function of a neighborhood is lost, that means it is there for the finding. This isolation, this failure to provide basic functions in our local community relationships, is pretty new. It's not something that we have to invent anew. In my experience, if you are talking to a group of people who are thirty-five and over, and you ask them about their childhood, very commonly they'll say, well when I was a child in the small town where I was, or in the city neighborhood; if I did anything wrong out on the block, or on a street, or in the neighborhood, my mother would know about it in five minutes.

You hear this over and over again, and then they tell about how neighbors would take kids to a museum or how they would organize kickball on the local street. You hear from older people in Canada and in the United States, this description of a set of relationships which supported the development of children and also provided a social context and a sense that there are some rules in the world.

You can say to the same people, tell me about your neighborhood today. And they'll talk about the neighborhood the way we have been talking about it. They'll say, well we don't know our neighbors anymore, we're isolated, I'm afraid of the kids, sort of; I don't know who they are. So in thirty to forty years, this shift has taken place. There is nothing, however, that we don't have today that wasn't there thirty to forty years ago. It is that we don't recognize the abundant resources that we have because we have gone over into the market. We've decided that the way you live a life is to buy it.

*Consumer Society.* The consumer job title is recent. It really grew in the middle part of the last century, and started with products and shoes. Productivity reached a stage where fourteen percent of the factories could make all of the shoes required for the whole US. This excess capacity was a problem. The solution was to convince people they need more shoes. And I think what's happened, is the consumer of things has migrated into the consumer of services. To the point where now when our child is born, we begin a long process of surrounding that child with services, systems, coaches, counselors, schooling, all designed to service them into a successful life.

*Virtual Life.* There is research that says people have bought the idea that electronics can provide a wide range of satisfaction and be an adequate substitute for relationships. More and more of our lives are engaged, rather than in relationships with people around us, in relationship to a television tube, in a relationship to a computer, and electronic games. A growing percentage of time is in the electrical world of television, computer, electric games, and handheld devices.

These are derivative ways of relating to people. Ways in which you can't touch, smell, feel, and really see the person. We call it a virtual world, a replacement part for the real world. These derivative electrical relationships take up a lot of space in our lives that was once filled with human relationships.

*Time and Speed*: This is not evil or wrong. Nobody sits down across from somebody and said "excuse me but I'd rather watch television". What has happened is the world of commerce and making a living has made speed and cost and efficiency the dominant values of the modern culture. So as soon as I am kind of a restless productivity machine, then I will look to those things which are quick and easy. My example is that now I can communicate very quickly with my daughters; I still don't have much to say to them, but I can not say something to them much more efficiently. The obsession for productivity, which is the major output of systems, has so dominated our culture that the habit and desire for productivity has taken over and dominated our experience.

*Gifts and Capacities.* The latter half of the book tries to remind people of the paths that you would take if you were going to engage in the basic renewal of the confidence and the capacity and the function of local neighborhoods. It is not mysterious. It calls for us to understand what we have in terms of our gifts, our skills, our capacities, our interests and our passions.

It asks us to take these seriously. To discover with as much interest as we give to institutional reform, how to make visible and put these together. What gifts and interests do we have right here to help raise our children. What can we do together that will encourage a much more healthful future for us rather than a world of children for instance who are growing in obesity almost daily and who are going to be the diabetics of the future.

When we weave together our capacities, we can do all of those things. It requires connectedness, and we suggest that the three basic elements for any community and it's rebuilding is to understand the gifts, make the connections that create the associations that allow us to be productive, and assure that we always are hospitable at the edge so we don't create strangers. In those three basic resources which are plentiful and in all of us, we have what we need to rebuild our communities.

*Social Fabric*: What is at risk is the social fabric of our society. The breakdown of social fabric has important consequences. The financial crisis and all the so called reform movements are signs that the system world is in trouble, and part of that trouble comes from the breakdown in the experience of community.

Robert Putnam wrote the famous book called Bowling Alone. What he was interested in, was the fact that in southern Italy, people had very few formal and informal associations, connected groups of people carrying on all kinds of activities, celebrations, and functions. But in northern Italy they did have a rich associational base. Then he began to do research that demonstrated that a key reason that there was so little business development in southern Italy was that they didn't have a rich associational life.

His study has become very famous, because it suggests that a rich fabric of

community associational life is the nest from which enterprise develops. The support system is there, the relationships are there, and what you need then is some invention but the invention is taking place in a connected space. As the erosion of the local associational space occurs, there is a decline in our ability for our nation and our people to generate new enterprises because the nest isn't strong, it isn't a hatching nest.

*Gift Mindedness:* What builds social fabric is gift mindedness. An easy way to think about gift-mindedness is to think about the glass half filled with liquid, and you can say it is half empty or half full; gift-mindedness is the ability to see the full half. "Needs focused" deficiency -mindedness is to look at the empty half. In a consumer world the question is, what don't you have? In a community building world the question is what do you have.

Gift-mindedness is the culture that says look at all that we have here, among us and between us and all the things we can do with that. It's the opposite of people being deficiency minded. The service world looks at a neighborhood and focuses on its needy people. They do a needs survey. They figure out how many bad houses they have, how much heart disease they have. How many of them can't see well without glasses.

A gift minded community is one that says we start with what we have, and in its connections we can perform all kinds of useful functions. Then, maybe we'll still need something from the outside. But, you don't know what you need from the outside until you know what you have inside. So gift-mindedness says we know what we have.

If you provide a human services, the only way to get money. Is to be needs and deficiency-minded. My doctor is not interested in me being healthy, my friends are, but my doctor isn't. Deficiency minded-ness produces the linguistic habit of labeling people. We call somebody homeless or a bi-polar schizophrenic, but that's not who they are. Now this is not to deny that people suffer, and have done things wrong, and have gotten in trouble.

The question is, what is the most useful way to look at a person, what is the most useful way to focus on them. What you see is what you get more of, so if you see a homeless person, if you see an ex-offender you will get more of that, and that's not who these people are. I've had people come to me and say, my name is John, I'm homeless. And I think, that's not who you are, why would you introduce yourself that way?

You're introducing yourself as a deficiency. I don't show up and say, my name is Peter and I'm housed. The deficiency label produces an empty context and a world where nothing really changes. Gift-mindedness is a choice to focus on the possibility of a person. This is a philosophical stance. It's a question of what kind of world you want to create. A world of deficiencies and services, or do you want to create a world of gifts and possibilities and care? It's, a shift in consciousness as much as it is a list of what to do.

*Labeling:* One of the more vivid examples that we've seen of this process, of looking at peoples so called deficiencies and then giving it a label, is in the field which is called developmental disabilities. One of the things that has been interesting over the last twenty to thirty years, is many of the people in that field can see the limitations of labeling people as being developmentally disabled, or what used to be called mentally retarded. This led to convincing communities that these people needed to be fixed and institutions were the place to do it. We

then removed labeled people from the communities so that they could, presumably, be fixed.

Now people realize the limits of these institutions, the harm they did to the lives of the people that have been removed because they were needy. All over Canada and the United States even the professionals are saying that we have to get these people back in the community because their greatest disability is not their so called I.Q., or their limitations, it's their isolation. .

It is disconnection created by the labeling. The harm this disconnection does to people by putting people with the same label together. We were warehousing deficiencies. Now we ask how we can reverse this process. That's the big question today, and the proof of a better way, is what you see in the lives of previously isolated people who have been reconnected.

Now there are people who got deinstitutionalized and pushed into the street, and that of course is reprehensible, but that's because we didn't have the community connections to receive them. There were no renewing relationships that community represents.

Mr. Hurlbert: How can people within a community nurture voluntary, self organizing, and sustainable associations and connections within the community? Is one of the places to start there with families and neighbors to form the bases of beginning that transformation to a new community?

*Neighborhood Building*: The problem with what we are talking about is, it's too simple. We lack a model, we lack independent variables. Basically, what we need is within walking distance and what I'm looking for can be found within the four or five houses in every direction. It begins by going outside the house, sometimes with a friend and asking people in your neighborhood, what do you like to do? What are you interested in? What are you willing to teach? What would you like to learn?

Its a connecting function. Social fabric will come from people being useful to each other. The first step may be people knowing each other; so some neighborhoods have some kind of getting to know you function, a block party, a picnic, sitting outside in the summer cooking. People who like dogs find each other, people who like gardening, and children, and cars find each other. That's kind of like minded association which is very useful.

It can't stop there. It is more than getting to know each other, there is a job to be done. We have a function, this neighborhood has a function, a family has a function. A dysfunctional family is a family where nobody has anything to do, not that they don't get along.

In the urbanization of our lives the family has reduced its function to become a fundraising and transportation center. The evening meal has become a fast food experience. We're really trying to say that the neighborhood is the space where social fabric and the possibility of another form of satisfaction can be found.

Once you decide that, then people will have a new conversation with their neighbors such as, what are your gifts, what are your interests, what are your skills, is there something you're willing to teach? That kind of conversation has the possibility of creating a more satisfying future.

*Economy of Abundance*: Satisfaction is born of a sense of abundance, despite

what surrounds you. If you want to know what abundance is, you've got to know your neighbor. If you are engaged with your neighbor, you know what kinds of gifts they have. They are people who are wonderful at listening , that they have a lovely voice, that they know about how jeans are created, that they also have skills, that they can fix motorcycles, or they play the guitar or they know how to show children how to make all kinds of toys.

Or they have a passion for children, or are concerned about pollution in the local neighborhood and you also know they have four things that they could teach. If you knew that about each neighbor, then you would see what the abundance in that community is. If you just knew thirty households on an average block, and knew the passions of the people that live in those households, that kind of information is transforming.

Too often what is abundant is invisible, where advertising is hammering us over the head every day by telling us we do not have enough, and making visible what is scarce. So the process of rebuilding community is to make visible the abundant gifts, skills, capacities and passions of local people, and connect them. That's the future, of not just a satisfying life, but in a sense the renewal of the citizen's capacity to have some kind of vision and produce something rather than them being this kind of poor, sad creature called a client or a consumer.

*The Objections to Neighborhood:* We are in this conversation in many places, and usually it doesn't go that well. People say this makes sense, "but..." And the "but" has to do with time and privacy. One of the costs of a consumer society and a productive and efficiency driven culture is that time has disappeared. Nobody sings the song," I'm biding my time because that's the kind of guy I am." We have made time a scarcity.

The Sabbath was created as an answer to restless productivity of the other six days. Originally, in the Old Testament, the Sabbath was not a time so much for worship; it was a time for some relief against the culture of empire, of productivity and of hard work. The Sabbath represents the possibility of a stance against time scarcity, of not having time; needing time.

In some sense, time, and speed, and the drumbeat of productivity is an escape from relationship. It's an escape from intimacy, an escape from contact, and even an escape from our freedom.

We have yielded to a twenty-four-seven culture. Always on call. Which means you never rest, you are constantly vigil. You're waking up in the middle of the night making sure the fire is still burning, and solving family problems in your mind. The core difficulty in what we're talking about is for people to come to terms with whether or not time scarcity is inevitable, or whether it's a choice. Without confronting the question of time, and its sister, speed, community doesn't have a chance.

In the United States, on average, households have the television on seven and a half hours a day. A significant percentage of the time of children's is spent on computers and electronic games. The same is true for adults in terms of all the non-work uses of the computer. If you just looked at the average family that says we have no time for relationships or productivity in the community and measured for a week the amount of time they have to sit in front of a machine that has some symbols on it, or some pictures, you would begin to see that a choice has been made. It is not true that most people don't have time for community, their time for it has been replaced by time for relating to electric

equipment.

Mr. Hurlbert:   How can local leadership be nurtured and developed to help an abundant community? And, do we need to redefine what constitutes community leadership to perhaps, someone who reaches out?

*Leadership:* One way of thinking about local leadership is to understand what has always created relationships is some person, organization, or culture that values connections. We are learning that the idea of a connector may be even more significant than the idea of a leader; I think your question implies that. I think there are places where leaders and somebody up front are very useful; but the missing piece in the local community, are the actors who are willing to go next door, aren't afraid of their neighbors, aren't afraid of invading their privacy and are prepared to introduce themselves and become friends. People willing to learn about all the things that each has to offer. People who are willing to recruit others to do the same thing, begin to weave a set of relationships around the abilities and gifts of the local people. So that in sum, they can begin to produce the neighborhood functions that we thought we could buy.

This implies that leadership is an act of initiation; it's not an act of control or role modeling or vision. And if you're looking for leadership don't look to the large buildings, because that is where systems are -- the system values and the system way of being is in effect. Just ask, "Where is somebody initiating something?" That is leadership.

*Privacy:* In addition to time, privacy is big concern. We might think of a new conversation with a neighbor, but we don't want to invade their privacy. This very common barrier to a strong neighborhood. It makes your house into a fort. Overcoming the sense that I am invading my neighbor's privacy by meeting them, and engaging them and enjoying them, and learning about them. This is a threshold issue. It may be that this story about privacy is basically an excuse for not doing anything. It's a way of protecting yourself from really becoming a significant part of your local community.

What we are learning is that if two people together on a block will go and talk to their neighbor, all three have a lot more confidence in the transaction because the two are encouraged by each other and the one they are meeting begins to feel as though there is something more here going on than just one person.

It is a pretty simple methodology to begin to overcome our sense that our house is our castle. The castle is the language of empire and individualism. The idea that the basic unit of an effective society is me; and therefore relationships with other people are really not essential. An I-centered home doesn't have an open door.

*Fallibility:* In addition to time and privacy, the wish for perfection is another obstacle to building social fabric. The dominant culture, symbolized by the system-world, longs for perfection. In institutional life, " failure is not an option." "I'm a can-do kind of guy" "Don't come to me with problems, come to me with solutions." The contempt for fallibility is also expressed in the longing for the perfect body, supposedly a hedge against our mortality.

What is private and a problem, is something that I now take to a professional.

We begin to hear more and more people say, "That person needs professional help, your child needs professional help." Every time the fallibility of our neighbor, of ourselves, of our children, of the other children is sent over to a confidential professional, a councilor, psychiatrist, psychologist; the ability as a community to know how to live with and support somebody's fallibility is lost.

We have seen some studies in neighborhoods where they have introduced developmentally disabled people, by that label, back into the community. The biggest question people ask is, what will we do we do with them? They have been so far removed from local communities that people grow up with no experience with people who have differences, even though they came from that same neighborhood.

This incompetence that has been created by professionals who take away all the knowledge of how to help people with their fallibilities. This secrecy of our vulnerability robs communities of the wonderful ability to say, "I see that you have this kind of a problem, but I love you just the same." We can do this because we had a son who had that same kind of problem, and let me tell you what we did. So that the knowledge is with us, and the care is with us, and not exiled into the professional world. Real communities accept their fallibility and their vulnerability.

Mr. Hurlbert:     Are there political structures within the community that are both formal and informal that need to be brought on board? Or perhaps, a person should be working separately from those existing systems. What is the solution there?

*The Role of Systems*: You always put the answer at the end of your question. I would say exactly. This is not an argument against political structures, or systems, or traditional leaders. It's an argument against our first-step dependence on them. There are some things that cities can do, they can create spaces, they can create community gardens, they can support neighborhood councils, they can stop repressive laws and ordinances. This is effectiveness for the residual after community does what it does best.

There are ways system policy can help. Government can offer incentives for local people in a neighborhood to get together. They will give you some money to do something if it's good for the neighborhood. So there is the domain of political, or leadership, or institutional action that we could talk about. But it's kind of a third conversation, and the first conversation is what can we here do to produce the future that we're looking for. If it's a problem child, or a neighborhood problem, or a safety problem, or a land problem, what capacity do we have to act on our own? Then you can ask what can we do with institutions and leadership? And then third you ask, is there some kind of advocacy we can engage in to try to get policies and practices more supportive?

*Democracy:* The purpose of a democracy isn't to allow us to vote; its purpose is to give us the power of freedom of expression, and freedom of association. The reason for that freedom is so that we together can produce the future. So the most political act of all, is a group of people with a vision, who are coming together to make it come true; and that's what a citizen is. The idea of democracy is not that you can buy more stuff in the so called free market. That was not ever contemplated as what democracy is about. Democracy is about the freedom to have a vision and make the future come true, not buy it.