




WINGSPREAD[®]

JOURNAL

THE JOHNSON FOUNDATION, INC. ■ RACINE, WISCONSIN ■ VOLUME 17, ISSUE 3 ■ AUTUMN 1995

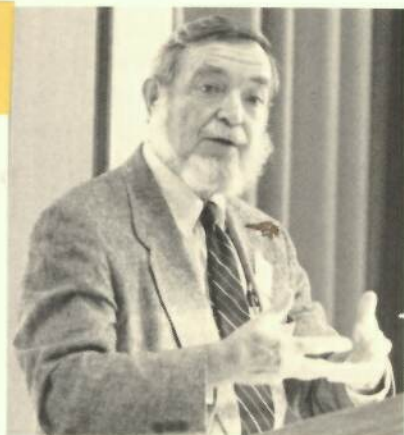


*"Upon this gifted age,
in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts... they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leach us of our ill
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric..." — Edna St. Vincent Millay*

How might stronger communities help reweave our social fabric?
The *Journal* examines civil and civic community.

■ COMMUNITY:

WILL WE KNOW IT WHEN WE SEE IT?



John McKnight is director of the Community Studies Program at the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University.

He has participated in several Wingspread conferences, and lectured at a Wingspread Briefing in 1994.

by John McKnight

Have we traded our citizenship for clienthood and consumer status?

As we think about ourselves, our community, and our institutions, many of us recognize that we have been degraded because our roles as citizens and our communities have been traded for the right to clienthood and consumer status. Many of us have come to recognize that as we exiled our fallible neighbors to the control of managers, therapists, and technicians, we lost much of our power to be the vital center of society. We forgot about the capacity of every single one of us to do good work and, instead, made some of us into the objects of good works—servants of those who serve. As we think about our community life, we recognize that something has happened to many of us as institutions have grown in power: We have become too impotent to be called real citizens and too disconnected to be effective members of community.

There is a mistaken notion that our society has a problem in terms of effective human services. Our essential problem is weak communities. While we have reached the limits of institutional problem-solving, we are only at the beginning of exploring the possibility of a new vision for community. It is a vision of regeneration. It is a vision of reassociating the exiled. It is a vision of freeing ourselves from service and advocacy. It is a vision of centering our lives in community.

The community experience

incorporates a number of strands.

Capacity We all remember the childhood question regarding how to describe a glass with water to its midpoint. Is it half-full or half-empty? Community associations are built upon the recognition of the fullness of each member because it is the sum of his or her capacities that represents the power of the group. The social policy mapmakers, on the other hand, build a world based upon the emptiness of each of us—a model based upon deficiency and need. Communities depend upon capacities. Systems commodify deficiencies.

Collective effort It is obvious that the essence of community is people working together. One of the characteristics of this community work is shared responsibility that requires many talents. Thus, a person who has been labeled deficient can find a "hammock" of support in the collective capacities of a community that can shape itself to the unique character of each person. This collective process contrasts with the individualistic approach of the therapeutic professional and rigidity of institutions that demand that people shape themselves to the needs of the system.

Informality Associational life in the community is a critical element of the informal economy. Here transactions of value take place without money, advertising, or hype. Authentic relationships are possible and care emerges in place of its packaged imitation: service.

The informality of community is also expressed through relationships that are not managed. While institutions and professionals war against human fallibility by trying to replace it, cure it, or disregard it, communities are proliferations of associations that multiply until they incorporate both the capacities and

the fallibilities of citizens. It is for this reason that labeled people are not out of place in community because they all have capacities and only their fallibilities are unusual.

Stories In universities, people know through studies. In businesses and bureaucracies, people know by reports. In communities, people know by stories. These community stories allow people to reach back into their common history and their individual experience for knowledge about truth and direction for the future.

Professionals and institutions often threaten the stories of community by urging community people to count up things rather than communicate. Successful community associations resist efforts to impose the foreign language of studies and reports because it is a tongue that ignores their own capacities and insights. Whenever communities come to believe that their common knowledge is illegitimate, they lose their power and professionals and systems rapidly invade their social place.

Celebration Community groups constantly incorporate celebrations, parties, and social events into their activities. The line between work and play is blurred and the human nature of everyday life becomes part of the way of work. You will know that you are in community if you often hear laughter and singing. You will know you are in an institution, a corporation, or a bureaucracy if you hear the silence of long halls and reasoned meetings.

Tragedy The surest indication of the experience of community is the explicit common knowledge of tragedy, death, and suffering. The managed, ordered, technical vision embodied in professional and institutional systems leaves no space for tragedy; they are basically methods for production. Indeed, they are designed to deny the

continued

WOMEN IN POVERTY FIND A VOICE AT WINGSPREAD



More than 25 women gathered at Wingspread to build community among women in poverty.

The more than 25 conference participants were as diverse as America, yet the women who gathered at Wingspread were alike in one important way: they know what it is to live in poverty. They were drawn together from the Women and Poverty Public Education Initiative, sponsored by the University of Wisconsin Women's Studies Consortium, to build a sense of community among women in poverty to enable them to improve their lives and to give voice to their concerns.

Give voice they did. The group developed a mission statement and discussed action plans for local communities that included generating support and energy among women in poverty, and using that energy to educate the general public about the realities of poverty.

"I think the movement is starting right here," said one participant. "And women are going to be at the forefront of it."

Empowering those in poverty to become involved in shaping the debate over shrinking public resources, welfare reform, and low-wage work will benefit not only poor women, but everyone. As a conference attendee predicted, "The dynamic and positive combination of elements and resources in this room is going to benefit not only people that are currently in poverty, but also the whole society that we live in." —

For more information contact Ann Statham, statewide director, UW-Parkside, Box 2000, Kenosha, Wis. 53141-2000, telephone 414-595-2162.

"Women in Poverty Building Stronger Community" was sponsored by the Helen Bader Foundation, Inc., The Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, the Lake Country 9to5, The Women and Poverty Public Education Initiative, The Poverty Network Initiative, The Joyce Foundation, and The Johnson Foundation.

central dilemmas of life. To be in community is to be an active part of associations and self-help groups. To be in community is to be a part of ritual, lamentation, and celebration of our fallibility.

We all know that community must be the center of our lives because it is

only in community that we can be citizens. It is only in community that we can find care. It is only in community that we can hear people singing. And if you listen carefully, you can hear the words: "I care for you, because you are mine, and I am yours." —

This article was excerpted from The Careless Society: Community and its Counterparts, by John McKnight. Copyright ©1995 by John McKnight. Reprinted with permission from BasicBooks, a division of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

THE BEREAVEMENT COUNSELOR:

A PARABLE

In his new book, *The Careless Society*, John McKnight shares a story about a small Wisconsin town, Prairie du Sac. He uses the parable to illustrate the differences between community and clienthood and to inspire us to look to each other—not to science or technology or the nearest service provider—for what is meaningful.

Like most American small towns, the citizens of Prairie du Sac rally round each other when a death strikes the community. Neighbors and relatives comfort the mourners; they "meet grief together in lamentation, prayer, and song. They call upon the words of the clergy and surround themselves with community."

One day, however, a stranger appears in town: a "bereavement counselor" with the new "grief technology." The counselor assures the townsfolk he is only there to assist them in their "grief processing." For the poor, the counselor advocates with the County Board for the "right to treatment" for those too impoverished to pay for counseling themselves.

A few of the townspeople, awed by the counselor's obvious creden-

tials, will insist that without his services mourners will have major psychological problems later in life. Others begin to use him because they want a service they are already paying for with their county taxes.

The results are as catastrophic as they are inevitable. McKnight writes:

"Finally, one day the aged father of a local woman will die. And the next-door neighbor will not drop by because he doesn't want to interrupt the bereavement counselor. The woman's kin will stay home because they will have learned that only the bereavement counselor knows how to process grief in the proper way. The local clergy will seek technical assistance from the bereavement counselor to learn the correct form of service to deal with guilt and grief. And the grieving daughter will know that it is the bereavement counselor who *really* cares for her, because only the bereavement counselor



In community, we find what is meaningful.

appears when death visits this family.

"It will be only one generation between the time the bereavement counselor arrives and the disappearance of the community of mourners. The counselor's new tool will cut through the social fabric, throwing aside kinship, care, neighborly obligations, and community ways of coming together and going on. ... The tools of bereavement counseling will create a desert where a community once flourished." —

Photo by Jerry Cross for Racine Area United Way

COMMUNITY INCLUDES YOUTH

Recently John Kretzmann, director of the Neighbor Innovations Network and co-author with John McKnight of *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, spoke at a Wingspread Briefing on roles for youth in community building. He challenged his listeners to be serious community builders, understanding that being serious involves a pledge to two core ideas: 1) everybody has a gift; and 2) everybody is going to use his or her gift for the community.

Including young people in community building is of vital importance. Kretzmann estimated that of the hundreds of stories of successful community building he has gathered over the years, all of them shared one characteristic: they involved youth as key players and in full participation in the community.

What can young people bring to the task of building a more civil community? According to Kretzmann, youth offer ideas and creativity, a connection to place, time to work and contribute, peers and family they can enlist to help, credibility as teachers, and boundless enthusiasm and energy.

How can communities tap into all that young people offer? Kretzmann suggests following the guidelines listed at right.

"10 Commandments" for Involving Young People in Our Communities

- 1 Always start with the gifts, talents, knowledge, and skills of young people. Find out what they like to do and are good at doing.
- 2 Always look for the positive in the unique individual. For example, it should be "Maria with the lovely voice," not "Maria the pregnant teen."
- 3 Every community is filled with useful work and service opportunities for young people. The corollary of this is that there is no community, institution, or organization that cannot find a useful role for a young person.
- 4 Always distinguish between real work and games or simulations, because young people can.
- 5 Fight age segregation. Youth today are the most age-isolated generation in our history, to everyone's detriment.
- 6 Avoid aggregating people, especially young people, by what they don't have. Too often we group people by their deficiencies instead of letting those who *can* help those who *can't*.
- 7 Move as quickly as possible beyond "youth advisory boards" or committees with only one youth on them.
- 8 Constantly cultivate opportunities for young people to teach and to lead.
- 9 Constantly reward and celebrate creativity, energy, and effort—loudly and with spirit. Whenever possible, let young people take the lead on the form the celebration will take.
- 10 Amplify continuously "we need you." Young people are not a problem, they are our solution.

An audio tape of John Kretzmann's Wingspread Briefing, "Roles for Youth: A Positive Perspective," is available from The Johnson Foundation. Telephone 414-681-3343 and ask for the Kretzmann Briefing tape.