

SIMPLY PUT, THIS
DEPARTMENT NEEDS
NEEDS.

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YES. NEEDS NEEDS.

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NO. NEEDING NEEDS
IS NOT THE KIND OF
NEED THE DEPARTMENT
NEEDS.



NEEDS NEEDS?

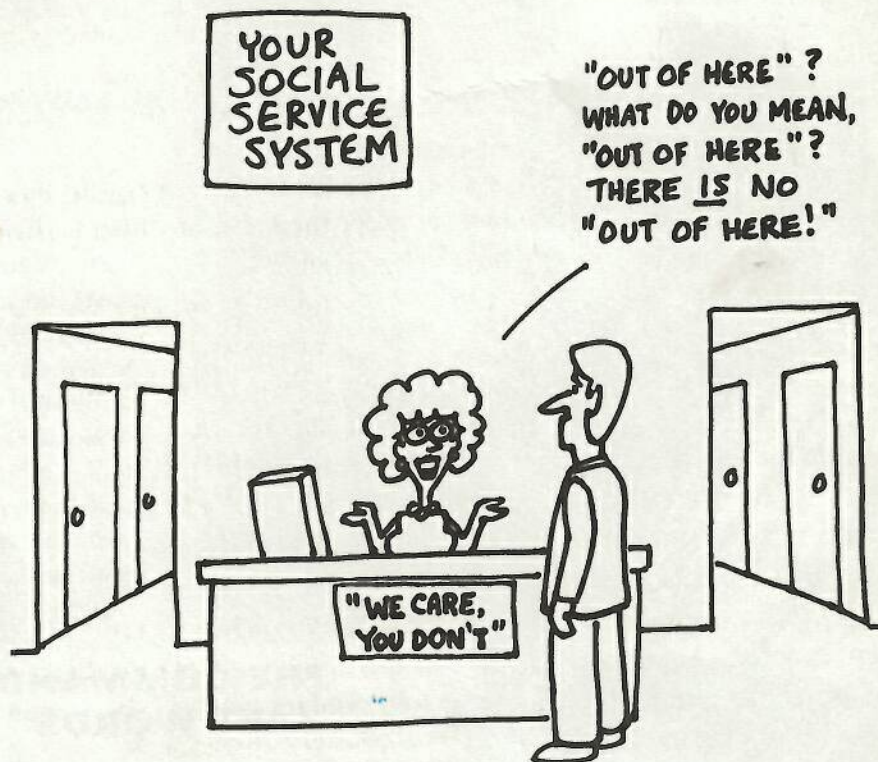
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IS NEEDING
NEEDS A NEED?

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WHEN YOU FIGURE
OUT THE KIND OF
NEED YOU NEED,
TELL ME.
MEANWHILE, I
NEED A BREAK.

John McKnight on
Being Served Up to the System



Community and its Counterfeits

an interview with John McKnight

conducted by writer David Cayley

for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "Ideas" series

illustrated by Scott Chambers

David Cayley

Contemporary Western societies have been characterized, until recently, by a relentless growth in social services. Demands for such services now far exceed the capacities of public budgets, resulting in what is widely recognized as "the crisis of the welfare state."

But the typical response has been a policy

debate that focuses on setting ceilings or streamlining services. The fact that social services monopolize the definition of welfare is still not questioned.

This Ideas program, broadcast in 1995, is about someone who has questioned that definition of welfare, someone who claims that beyond a certain intensity the profes-

sionalization of care, counsel, and consolation turns citizens into clients. He is someone who insists that paid services degrade and often destroy abilities which already exist within the community.

His name is John McKnight, and he has worked with communities and neighborhoods throughout Canada and the United States, as well as directing the program in community studies at Northwestern University in suburban Chicago.

He believes that a service economy based on needs hides a very different landscape in which gifts and capacities are what count, and he believes that a good society in which everyone's gift can be given only begins to be born when this obscuring veil is lifted.

In these programs the author shares some of the stories of a lifetime's community organizing.

He defines the distinctive non-institutional sphere, which he calls "citizen space"; he explores the disabling effects on this space of professional help; and he describes the regeneration of hospitable communities based on the giving of gifts.

John McKnight

Culture, at least in the more traditional sense, is a set of learnings about how we as a people can persevere or survive in this place.

Modern institutions are not about that question. They are new machines redefining us not as a people in a place, but as individuals in a system.

I think one of the things that's happened in modern society is that we think more and

more that institutions make people, that you will be trained, that out of the training and management of your life you will become who you are.

I see very little discourse or consideration about the question: What is the gift of each person here?

I often buy presents for Christmas time through catalogs, because I don't like to shop. As I buy them through the year, I'll put them on a shelf. And I had a visitor who looked in the closet where I had all these things stacked up on the shelf, and the visitor said, "What's all this junk?" [laughs]

I said: "That's not junk, those are gifts." And the visitor, who is a very wise person, said to me: "Oh no, that's just junk. A gift isn't a gift until it's given."

My grandmother, I think, had a lot of influence on me, because one day — she was an Irish-American — one day, probably when I was five or six years old, in her kitchen, she looked at me and said: "You know, you have a gift." I think maybe I hoped she was going to give me a gift, [laughs] But she said: "Blarney." And I think she was trying to tell me about a talent I had been given.

Cayley

"Community and Its Counterfeits" is in three parts. I recorded the interviews with John McKnight over a period of several days at his home.

The first program explores the meaning of community, the effect on community of social services, and the way in which John McKnight's background made him aware of this effect.

McKnight

I was raised in a family of people who call themselves "Covenanters." There aren't many of them in the world—I think there are maybe three or four thousand in the United States, and in Northern Ireland and Scotland there are maybe five or six thousand more.

They are the remnants of the formation of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, back in the 1680s, but the Covenanters were the extremists: they were the people who were unwilling to compromise with the British crown. They made a covenant to resist the crown and to say that the head of their church was Jesus Christ and not the king.

There were a bunch of compromises made by the other resisters or dissenters, but the Covenanters didn't compromise, and so they stood in rebellion and fought the English in some hopeless skirmishes; in Scotland you can see the little monuments to the places where the English descended on them in their prayer meetings and killed them all.

Finally they fled to Northern Ireland and then some of them came to the United States. Those were the people who are my ancestors on my father's side and had a great influence, I think, on me.

They saw themselves as a saving remnant, as the people of Zion. So we were raised with the view that there were three or four thousand people in the United States who knew the truth: then there were the others.

By the time I left my family I think I was pretty well convinced that the institutions of society were not something that were to be honoured, were to be respected, were going to guide anybody in the right direction, that it

was from our community and our families and our faith that our guidance would come.

The first thing that struck me when I went to the university — I went to Northwestern University — the first day the thing that struck me was that the university had a discriminatory policy. It would let in only black people who were athletes, and it had a quota on the number of Jewish people it would admit.

And the motto of this university is: "Whatsoever things are true, think on these things."

So I come to this institution that has this motto on its lintel, and find that it is just systematically denying the gifts of people who are black or who are Jewish. That confirmed, right off, what I had been told was the truth. And so I think that's probably the beginning of a story.

Cayle

John McKnight's story, as it unfolded, was about community organizing, first at Northwestern as a student and then, after three years in the Navy, with the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, the city's first civil-rights organization. Later he would work for the American Civil Liberties Union, the Kennedy administration's pioneering Equal Employment Opportunity Office, and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, as its mid-western director.

Then, at the end of the sixties, he found himself unexpectedly transplanted to academia.

McKnight

Northwestern University received a major

grant from the Ford Foundation to start an urban center, in 1969. As the central cities were burning across the United States, the Ford Foundation gave money to universities to give them an incentive to apply their knowledge, their expertise, to the solution of city problems. They gave money to a lot of universities. Northwestern was one of them.

An old friend was the person who was to create this new center. He thought there should be at least one person with real-world experience — in terms of the realities of cities and their lives.

So in a very unusual move the university came to me, a man with my bachelor's degree, and said, "Would you come to this center and we'll make you a professor, a full professor." And so I was made a tenured professor at the university by a stroke of the pen ... [laughs] and I've been there ever since.

It was clear that my purpose in being there was to be the connection between the demands and realities of the city and its life and the university and its resources.

That has been a very happy fit for me because I don't think my background would allow me to be a full-time traditional academic.

And then as time passed I began to develop a little clarity on my own part as to a particular kind of focus that I might have, other than being the connector, and that focus evolved into what we now call the program in community studies. It is an

effort to understand how local communities solve problems. And that's pretty much what we've come to be known for.

Cayle

How would you define that word, "community"?

McKnight

You know, if you go to a sociology department and you ask that question of the faculty, you'll never leave.

But my experience is, put in academic terms, applied. So when you ask me, "What is the community?" I probably listen to it as *where* is it? And there the answer is: in your mind.

In the mind of every other person in North America it's a different place. To some people it's a feeling, to some people it's relationships, to some people it's a place, to some people it's an institution.

So, while "community" is a word that is



JOHN MCKNIGHT

used a lot, it is certainly not very functional. I've had to come to creating a definition of community that is useful for our purposes: that community is the space where citizens prevail.

Cayle

John McKnight found what he considered to be the most pertinent description of this space in the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville.

DeTocqueville was a young French aristocrat who visited the United States in 1831 and 1832, journeying as far west as Green Bay, Wisconsin, and as far south as New Orleans. He noted on his travels how the young republic differed from the Old World, and then, on his return to France, set down his impressions.

McKnight

That book, *Democracy in America*, is, I think, the most useful book I know to help understand who we are.

He says, if I can summarize him in a rather gross form, that he came here and he found a society whose definitions and solutions were not created by nobility, by professionals, by experts or managers. They were created by what he identified as little groups of people, self-appointed, common men and women who came together and took three powers:

- the power to decide there was a problem,
- the power to decide how to solve the problem — that is the expert's power — and then,
- the power to solve the problem.

These little groups of people weren't

elected and they weren't appointed and they were every place. They were, he said, the heart of the new society — they were the American community as distinct from the European community. He named these little groups "associations."

Association is the collective for citizens, an association of citizens.

So we think of our community as being the social space in which citizens in association do the work of problem-solving, celebration, consolation, and creation — *that* community, *that* space — in contrast to the space of the system with the box at the top and lots of little boxes at the bottom.

And I think the hope for our time is still in those associations.

Cayley

Associations, in de Tocqueville's view, expressed the spontaneous and voluntary character of the new society, the way in which Americans, without common traditions, could still make common cause.

This is what John McKnight wants to underline in de Tocqueville's account: the idea of a social space in continuous creation by its citizens, who claim, by the very fact of their citizenship, authority and responsibility in this space.

Where such a space exists, McKnight says, associations will naturally tend to proliferate according to the gifts of the citizens.

McKnight

The best community — it will be imperfect, it can't be fixed beyond this — is one in which all kinds of methods create

all kinds of situations in which each of us finds relationships where our gifts are recognized and magnified. In my hometown, the newspaper printed a list of associations that the editor knew about — this is a town that has 1,300 people and the list is 81 associations, and I know there are a lot more than that.

Now, why are there so many of these little associations in such a little town? Well, I think the reason for that is that they keep proliferating until all the ways that we appreciate each other, almost the mathematical possibilities for clusters of appreciations, get uniquely magnified and celebrated in these kinds of groups.

I think that leads to rich and diverse communities that recognize the specialness of people and provide all kinds of ways for them to express their spirit and to find other people who give expression to the spirit in the same way.

Cayle

John McKnight defines community as the space in which citizens associate in their own individual and collective interests. He believes this space to be mainly threatened by institutionally-defined social programs with the power to establish authoritative definitions of need.

Needs are, in effect, the resources of the service sector of contemporary economies — what iron ore is to the steel industry, needs are to those who propose to meet them.

A hundred years ago, 90 percent of those who worked produced tangible goods and only 10 percent what economists call “services.”

Today the situation is nearly reversed: a declining minority are employed in industry and agriculture, while a majority produce service of some kind.

The perverse consequence, according to John McKnight, is that for this new economy to grow, problems must proliferate.

McKnight

We have now, in a funny way, an architecture of industrial systems that manufactures and delivers services so that people can be paid for doing work that isn't goods-producing.

So we're involved in, actually, a humorous but tragic kind of never-ending search for new needs in people, because systems that grow have to find new needs and impute them to

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we need more outreach, then we are making a decision that the neighborhood's indigenous associations, leadership, and capacities are inadequate to solve the problem.

In that trade-off we are always diminishing the community's powers by investing in the system's powers.

The fourth negative effect has to do with the fact that it is possible that a particular intervention has more benefit than cost. However, because one intervention works does not mean that six other interventions, each that independently might seem to work, will give you a seven-times-more-powerful intervention.

In fact, the aggregation of these interventions may negate the positive benefits.

We can understand that in a metaphorical sense. I live in a neighborhood where there are some trees. You could ask me, or any of my neighbors, "Do you live in a forest?"

We would say, "No, we don't live in a forest."

"But you have trees."

"Yes, but we don't live in a forest."

A forest is a place where there are enough trees that they redefine the environment. We all know when we walk into a forest because what is growing in a forest is different than what is growing in my neighborhood — the density of trees creates a different ecology, there are different animals, so that the very same elm trees, if there are enough of them, will create a new world, a new environment, a new ecology.

So it is with services. You can have one service alone, but when you get enough ser-

vices intervening in a person's life, you will create a forest of services.

So aggregating services around people creates new environments that will guarantee deviant behavior by the people who receive the services, even though any one of the services may look justified in and of itself.

Cayle

These are the four harms which John McKnight considers to be structural, in-built effects of human-service interventions:

people will become known by their deficiencies, not their gifts;

money will tend to be put at the discretion of those offering services, rather than those defined as "in need";

active citizenship will retreat in the face of professional expertise; and

services will aggregate to form total environments.

These effects, McKnight believes, are so widely overlooked because of the compelling rationale for human services. The good human services claim to provide is care, and care is normally an expression of love.

The result is that the underlying political and economic structure of services is hidden by what John McKnight once called "the mask of love," a mask which deceives the benefactor and the beneficiaries alike.

McKnight

Good intention is, I think, the most dangerous explanation for an action that there is. We ought never, ever to think because somebody has good intention, says they care, is doing something for a good motive, the

it is any indication that in fact what they do will be good for others, for themselves, or for society. Almost every crime, I think, [laughs] that is a societal crime, was done by people who had good intentions.

The great, great tragedy of the service industry is the blindness, the mask it wears, the blinding mask it wears, because of its belief in its good intentions.

Cayle

One of the inevitable side effects which John McKnight assigns to social services is the replacement of community capacities. Knowledge vested in professionals disappears from communities. Confidence withers in the face of professional mystique.

Eventually communities lose the vital functions which sustain them as communities. And this loss, John McKnight believes, extends right down to the level of the family.

McKnight

Families are the primary association in a society. Just as other associations are under assault by our systems, so families are under assault as well.

You can see it, and I can see it, and all of us can see it in our own lives. If you have a family, a group of people, intimate, closely bound to each other, and you say of them: "What do they do? They are of the same blood, but why do they stay together, this little group?" Well, this is a good question.

Why would they stay together if their health is in a doctor, their knowl-

edge is in a teacher, their mental stability is in a psychiatrist, their conflict-resolution is in a lawyer, their family conflict is in a social worker, their meals are in a McDonald's?

What is this family I describe? What does it do? It really doesn't do anything. A family that is a collection of clients has no purpose other than procreation.

Human social organizations persevere because they perform functions. There's always a motive, a reason, a cement, something that keeps those people together, and we have always said kinship keeps people together as a cement

But I think we've radically overestimated the cement if it is nothing more than blood, because what we know is that "blood" was



a primary way of saying, "those for whom I will take mutual responsibility and those with whom we are able to make a way and make a life."

And now the people in this family don't have these mutual functions. Nothing's left but affect, nothing's left but the hopeful power of love or romance, or care.

I think relationships grow out of function, that ultimately love grows strong on the basis of people who have worked together, who have suffered together.

I think of my grandparents on my mother's side, my Irish-American grandparents. I can hardly think of anybody I knew who loved each other more.

I never saw them touch each other, but I never saw them apart from each other, and I never saw them doing anything but making a life, a way, a home, an enterprise together. They had so understood each other's gifts, they had so worked them together and magnified them and grown powerful together, and each day in that way their affection grew, so that when I knew them as old people, the love was impenetrable, and divorce could never have cut its way through that bond.

Cayle

John McKnight explored the issue of how families and communities lose their vital functions when he gave the fourth annual E. F. Schumacher lecture in 1984. He called his lecture "John Deere and the Bereavement Counselor," and in it he considered the suggestive analogy between the two figures of his title.

John Deere was the blacksmith from

Grand Detour, Illinois, who in 1837 invented a new tool, a steel plow capable for the first time of busting tough prairie sod. With this new tool, the great plains were tamed for agriculture. But the settlers, as they moved westward, often left behind them deserts of depleted soil, which later arrivals had to learn to husband and regenerate.

Bereavement counseling, McKnight claims, is a tool with comparable effects on the human ecology. It cuts into the weave of community life as surely as Deere's plow sheared the tangled grasses of the prairie, and leaves behind a social desert.

McKnight

How did communities deal with tragedy before bereavement counselors and psychological therapists descended on us when a tragedy came?

They came together and sat with each other, and they cried together, they held hands, they wept on each other's shoulders, they remembered stories of other suffering and told those stories to each other, they sang songs that had been a part of the memory of their people forever about tragedy and about the meaning of life in the face of tragedy, and they said the seven hundred prayers that they knew that called for God to help them through this time.

This people, this people together, they lit some incense, and they sat in silence, and then they got up and they had a man with a mask of the devil, and they danced with the devil and scorned and laughed at him, and then they came together and they had a great meal, and they laughed, and they drank, and

they cried. And all of that was what we did.

But now we are "enriched" because instead of that we have a person with a master's degree in bereavement counseling from the University of Minnesota who can come to our home and sit with us and put inputs into us that will help us process our grief, like a sausage-making machine processes sausage. We are impoverished by that service if it ever replaces our prayers, our songs, our tears our hands.

Cayle

But does it ever precisely replace them, or is there always a gap? I mean, a bereavement counselor, had he or she appeared a generation earlier, would have met incredulity: "You're a whaaaat?"

McKnight

Yes.

Cayle

We know how to grieve. The need must first appear plausible. The bereavement counselor will say, "Yes, it's very well for you, McKnight, to vaporize about community and all the wonderful things that used to happen, but in fact, lonely, isolated people need my service."

McKnight

Ah. And I can assure you that you're correct. I actually had the honour of

meeting the first master's degree, certified bereavement counselor in the United States of America. This was about fourteen years ago, and I met her at the University of Minnesota.

And that was exactly what I was wondering. They think they're meeting a need.

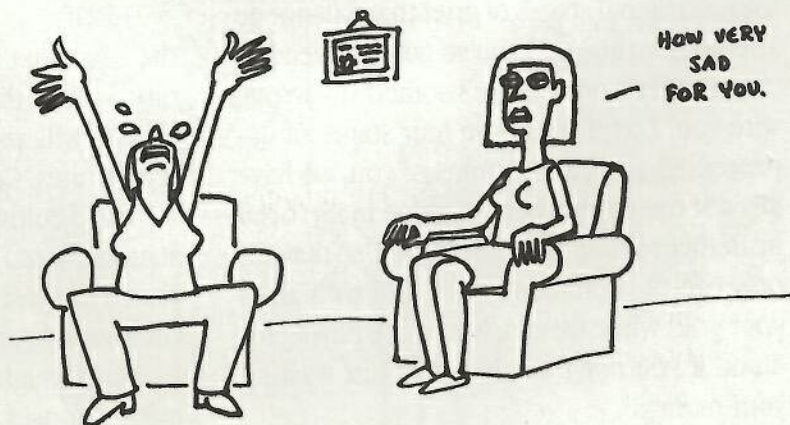
In Canada or the United States, where would I find anybody who, when asked, "Do you need a bereavement counselor?" would say, "Yes"?

They would not have heard of one, they wouldn't know what one did, and it might be hard to imagine.

So the bereavement counselor I met had to figure out some place to begin the work of introducing this new service in a society that didn't really see a need, and exactly the people you're talking about are the people that the bereavement counselor picked.

"Oh, we understand you've got a family, it still functions, these relationships are there, but there are lonely widows in nursing homes

BEATRICE MEALY, BEREAVEMENT COUNSELOR



who just lost their husbands and they have nobody, they need my service."

And I think the way the progression goes is: they find those people who are the most defenseless and unthinking and underprivileged, and introduce their services there.

Then they approach the institutions of society — the United Way, the government or foundations, and say, "You should pay me to provide my bereavement services to this poor lonely widow." If they're successful in that, they get bereavement counseling institutionalized as a service.

Then they will build out from there. They will say, "We have done studies that show how kinship grieving is all right, but there are seven *stages* of grief. Our studies show that the grief process in the strongest of kinship groups involved in the traditions of solace only reaches the first three stages of grief.

"But there are four later stages of grief that our research has discovered, and we meet those four stages of grief.

"You may not be underprivileged and you may have a full family, and you may have a community that provides you solace and support, but our research shows that there are four additional stages of grief that will not be affected by this, and you've got that need."

In other words, there's something wrong with you, David. You have four stages of unprocessed grief, and let me tell you, we have just got the government to agree in its social insurance to fund grief counseling, so that not only can the community not deal with all of your grief while we can, but you're paying for it and if you don't use it, you're just wasting your money!"

So call them in, David, because you need them. Then when you call a bereavement counselor in, and your Aunt Mary calls to say, "David, I'd like to come over this afternoon," because she's a part of the solace of your community, you say, "Aunt Mary, I'd love to have you come over, but the bereavement counselor is here. Could you come over some other time?"

In this way, Aunt Mary comes to know the real truth, which is that the real solace is the solace you pay for, and hers is just sort of a tawdry, shabby, second-rate thing.

And she's right, because she has been replaced by a bereavement counselor. That's the way the service system works.

Cayle

John McKnight sees community and social service as bound in the relationship mathematicians call "inverse proportion" — their sum is constant so as one waxes, the other must wane.

He believes that where consolation or other social supports are absent, the question must always be, "Where is the community?" Not, "Where is the bereavement counselor?"

Justifying bereavement counseling on the basis that there is no consoling community — even though it may in some cases be true — will also ensure that no community regenerates. Consolation will warp towards a standard cultivated in graduate schools, and a professional grouping will appear with a vested interest in damping down or denying community capacities.

But though Aunt Mary and the bereavement counselor may be alternatives, it is

clear that the consolation each offers is of a very different kind. Community responses to life's vicissitudes differ from institutional responses. They cannot be managed in the same way, nor can they be certified or guaranteed.

Community responses rest on character and ingrained virtue, things which can vary, waver, and fail. This maybe one of the reasons, John McKnight supposes, that communities have yielded before the Utopian promise of a system that cares, and cares unfailingly, to the highest professional standard.

Regeneration of community, therefore, depends on our abandoning the fantasy that our highest hopes can be transformed into effective techniques.

John McKnight calls that fantasy "the belief that people can be fixed."

McKnight

There are all kinds of people called "developmentally disabled"—some people will label these folks as "mentally retarded"—who are in institutions and group homes, who, like all of us, were born with a set of gifts and capacities and a set of limits.

If you go and look at what's being done with a lot of these people, you will find forty-year-old people with whom professionals are working and that they're being taught how

to tie their shoes.

And you might ask, "How's he coming along?"

"Well, he can't tie his shoes."

"How long do you think people have been trying to teach him how to tie his shoes?"

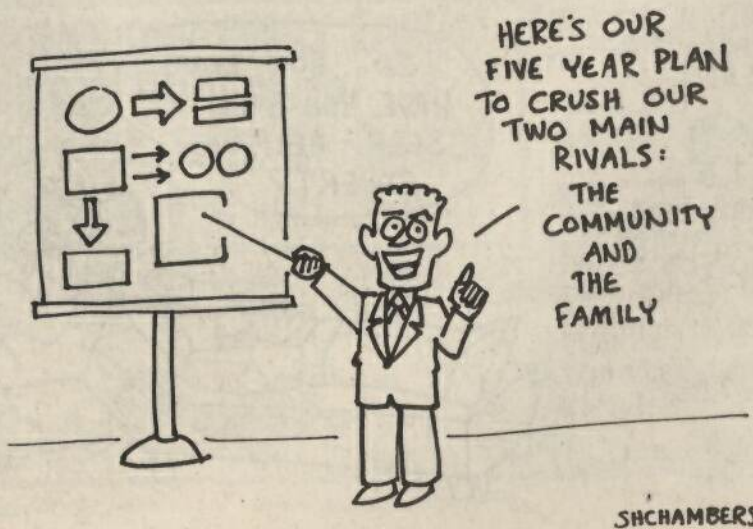
"Well, I've only been here four years and we do this getting ready for community-life practice twice a week, so I don't know, but probably, with the people before me, maybe twenty years."

"Oh, twenty years teaching this man how to tie his shoes. But if he ever learns how to tie his shoes, then, am I correct," I say to the professional, "then he'll be ready for community life and he can come out with us in the community?"

"Yeah, that and a few other things."

Now, that man will live in the forest of professionals until he dies. He'll never be born to the community because they are going to

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STRATEGY SESSION)



fix somebody who is unfix-able, and in the course of that deny his gifts to community. It's a terrible trade-off!

But most people in the community probably believe he needs to be fixed. Now, they believe he needs to be fixed because somebody came into the community and said they could fix him. There was a time when nobody thought he needed to be fixed because nobody proposed to fix him.

So in that sense the possibility of saying, "Yes, okay, you never will be able to tie your shoe or read, but you're welcome here" is the door to community and the recognition of the gifts. All of community life is like that.

There is nothing that is fixable in perfection. I think it comes with the human nature that we are not finally going to be fixed.

So I start with the premise that to the degree that the society is committed to and invested in fixing people, it creates huge and increasingly burdensome and increasingly

tyrannical institutions that intervene in the lives of people. When what we needed was a community that saw their gifts and said, those gifts need to be given.

We have wonderful possibilities in society if we're willing to fail to be gods, if we give up the idea that we can create institutions and systems that will fix everything, systems that will be the modern gods, that will make us whole, make us real, make us all those things.

That's when life will come alive and communities will grow, when we see the wonderful possibilities of failing to be God. ■

Come along to the next *Mouth* when Cayley interviews McKnight for his views on the regeneration of communities. To watch McKnight's video, "Community Approach to Health Improvements," go to <http://videos.med.wisc.edu/videoinfo.php?video=40>. It is free.



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