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Community: The Structure of Belonging -Written by Peter Block

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BOOK REVIEW

Community: The Structure of Belonging

Peter Block

Second edition. Oakland, CA: Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2018. 236pp, ISBN 9781523095568, €21.82 (pbk); €16.77) (Kindle)

Review by Leah Davcheva

Coach and Solutions Focus Business Professional

“The hard part of building community is
that it is always a custom job. It is born of local people,
with unique gifts, deciding what to create together in this place.”
(Block, 2018: 5)

Looking for resources to support my growing interest in neighborhood building, the 2018 edition of *Community: The structure of belonging* grabbed my attention. I had only just turned a couple of pages, when I started noticing ideas and making meanings which strongly resonated with the Solutions Focus approach (as I know it). I was tempted to refer to the “Clues” suggestions and tick off the visible signs of resemblance but decided to first enjoy the book in its entirety and welcome any and every sign of SF thinking.

Peter Block is a training practitioner, consultant, author of several best-selling books, speaker and, as he typically introduces himself, a citizen of Cincinnati, Ohio. He is a social pioneer!

His *Community* is a passionate read about making the world better. It engages us, conceptually and on the level of practical application, in ways to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole. The overall premise of the book is positioned around change: **shifting conversation** from the problems of community to the **possibility** of community, bringing together people **not used to** being together into **conversations**, commitment to **creating a future** distinct from the past. The very definition of community - the collective way of people to make a difference - testifies to the strong SF ethos of the book.

The author has structured the book in two parts and they both have a metaphor for a title: *The Fabric of Community* and *The Alchemy of Belonging*. The thread that holds Part One together is the idea that community building is created one room at a time and from an infinite number of small steps, each of them important in its own right. Each invitation made, relationships sustained, and every meeting attended are powerful ingredients of the move that communities seek.

I am particularly attracted by the idea of grasping the crucial role of language. Our language, or conversation, is the action step that makes the desired future possible. Communal transformation and change occur through language, so much so that every community or neighborhood gathering takes the action forward and becomes an example of the future we want to create. In the “shift” fabric of the first part we can also discern the bright colors of elements such as relatedness, learning something of value, choosing to notice possibility rather than get stuck in problem solving, agreeing on what matters, completing tasks and producing physical things, and, equally, viewing differences as a source of vitality and gift.

In Part Two of the book, *The Alchemy of Belonging*, Peter Block connects his ideas from the previous part with actual practice and lays out his methodology. Clearly and succinctly, he specifies the tools to make transformation happen.

The first ingredient he chooses to bring to our attention is leadership. Rather than a (scarce) personality characteristic he views leadership as a set of universally available acts of convening of citizens and designing interactions. Notably, these experiences are in themselves the desired future.

Further, Block picks up the conversation strand from the earlier pages and goes an abundant distance in developing the specific elements of conversations “that count”. He describes six different types of building community conversations and we explore them in three chapters. The conversations that produce something more than just talk bear the following titles:

- Invitation
- Possibility
- Ownership
- Dissent
- Commitment
- Gifts (of the gathering and the ones each brings to the world)

Far from romanticizing community, Block invites us to consider how shifting both our thinking and practice could achieve reconciliation in several dimensions of community that are sources of so much grief, e.g. public safety, disconnectedness, alienation. In tune with his elegant and accessible way of writing, he finishes his book with a simple sentence, directly addressing his readers with what, I think, holds a true SF spirit: “*I hope that this book contributes in a small way to moving your efforts forward*” (Block, 2018: 187).

The design of the book (by Leigh McLellan) beautifully matches its content and makes for a serene, yet robust reading experience. A feeling of structure and harmony comes from the horizontal lines placed on the part and chapter openings. There is just enough white space on the pages and in-between the lines, inviting us to start or resume reading immediately. For each design element is distinct and recognizably welcoming, thus underpinning the lucid atmosphere and direction of *Community*.

I hope that this book would be an insightful and stimulating read for community builders who want to do community with an SF stretch; for anyone who is wanting to adopt a respectful and cooperative stance, apply an interactional view, work from within the context of the local people, and treat each case as different.

As for me, *Community* gives me confidence and even more courage to use Solutions Focus ideas and thinking in my ongoing local neighborhood work.

Reference

Block, P. (2018). *Community: The structure of belonging*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

The reviewer

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