

Assisting Communities to be Welcoming

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Neil Barringham regularly spends time with people in his neighbourhood who live with a range of disabilities. He says that some of his best learning has been through welcoming isolated people into the home that he and his wife Penny and their two children share. Neil is a community worker. He is currently doing postgraduate studies and works at A Place to Belong located in an inner-suburb and working Brisbane-wide. This chapter illustrates the particular way that Neil goes about developing connections between ordinary members of neighbourhoods and individual people who are isolated or wanting a greater sense of belonging. His work is distinguished by simplicity, the importance of spirituality and the importance of solidarity.

When I talk to others about assisting communities to be more welcoming and inclusive, I firstly think about how I go about this in my own neighbourhood. It is important to me that the work I do in my professional life is in parallel with what I practice in my own neighbourhood. In the context of each, I try to base my actions on three important things; the importance of simplicity; the importance of spirituality; and the importance of solidarity. I define these in the following ways. Simplicity is about being willing to move down the ladder, to slow down, to create more open spaces rather than filling up spaces, and divulging power rather than clutching at power. Spirituality is about depth, congruence, openness and generosity, and finding ways to nurture hopes for a more peaceful and loving world. Solidarity with others in my neighbourhood is about working with whomever I can – in whatever ways we can – towards a more peaceful and just world in our “little patch”.

I enter my professional involvement from a personal base of working towards simplicity, spirituality and solidarity in my own neighbourhood. I suggest that if any of us wishes to facilitate communities to be more welcoming, then we need to begin by acting in the context of our own lives, whether in our neighbourhood, our workplace, or a club or group to which we belong. Finding one person who is marginalized in any of these settings might involve spending informal time with that person, doing ordinary or simple things together, or listening to that person’s story or sharing our own. We need to remember that the foundation of all community development is an attentive, respectful conversation between two people. I also believe that it is important for us to constantly reflect on our own lives and on the lives of those who are marginalized in our own communities. We need pointers: stories and insights that inform our work and our thinking.

STORIES AND INSIGHTS

One recent example for me came from a spirited woman named Shula. I met Shula through my work at A Place to Belong. She lived in another area from my own home neighbourhood. Shula was a stylish, gifted, artistic, and intelligent woman in her late twenties. She inspired others with her story and her reflections on life yet she still struggled and suffered. Shula experienced the ravages of a depression so profound that she was hospitalized twenty-five times in five years. She felt she had experienced a

living death, “One way I can describe it”, she wrote, “was that it felt like there was a void inside me – nothingness, where the person I was, used to be. It was as though a violent storm had raged through every room, every corridor of my being, sparing nothing. In my eyes, it was a cruel world and I deserved all the shit I got.” She said that pain, grief, shame and loneliness were her companions and that they were the only feelings that told her she was alive. Shula’s words, articulated so expressively, gave a picture of the disabling effects of mental illness with the pain of disconnectedness from self and from others.

While the words of Shula and others often guide my work, I have also come to understand that when we are trying to connect a marginalized person more strongly to others in their community, some important factors need to be kept in mind. Firstly, because each of us is unique, a sense of belonging will differ for each of us; we might gain a sense of belonging through different experiences. For example, some might feel that they belong through a sense of making a contribution; others might feel that they belong through having just one person in their neighbourhood catch up with them on a regular basis. Secondly, gaining a sense of belonging is a deeply personal process. For community activists, the work of developing more inclusive communities is far more than social mapping or social management. Belonging and friendship are of the *heart* and *spirit*; they are cultural processes. Thirdly, it is important to recognize that having a sense of belonging is a challenge for everyone. I come to my work with a deep sense that I often struggle to relate to others in my neighbourhood and community; friendship is at times a lonely and complicated process for me. In the modern world, a sense of belonging is not only a disability issue; it is also a societal issue. We are all broken and all unique. In many ways we are all able and disabled.

Working one by one, each of us can assist a community to have a spirit of welcoming. Any one of us can be community builders, community assisters, or community connectors. We might be paid or unpaid, a carer, a family member, or a friend. While we cannot manufacture inclusive communities, we can search for those spaces, places and people where inclusion and connection might occur. We can ask, invite, link and create opportunities. We can affirm, encourage and sometimes simply just wait for the right moment. Neighbourhood streets might look empty, people may look busy and preoccupied, front-doors might appear closed, but there will be open spaces somewhere and a community connector will be someone who believes that there is energy there in spite of appearances.

ONE-BY-ONE

A good example of this simple one-by-one way of connecting people can be found in the following illustration. A support worker was concerned about helping the man he was working with. He wanted to establish links with the man’s neighbours when the man moved from hospital to his new residence in a block of flats. Together, they considered how he could meet his neighbours in a simple and natural way. They decided *not* to go door-to-door, introducing themselves. After noticing a bench at the front of the flats, which was besides the letterboxes, the worker suggested that they try sitting on the bench for a while after the mail was delivered. Sure enough, people came out to collect their mail and within days of trying this plan, the man and his worker met a number of his neighbours, some of whom became reasonably close friends with the man. The worker didn’t just see a bench; he saw an opportunity for connection.

Fundamental to my work is getting alongside a person who indicated a desire for a greater connectedness, and to understand something of that person's situation. I begin by finding one person in the community who might be able to respond to the person's yearning to belong. For example, a man who had lived in a large institution for many years came to a suburb where he had never lived. He knew no one. His only friends were a couple of people he had known in hospital and who now lived a long way away. The man's mental health is extremely fragile and he often needs to stay at the local mental health clinic. I helped him meet a woman who has now kept in touch with him for four years. They go to art shows, for walks and enjoy coffee together. They talk regularly on the phone. He describes their friendship as being "like a sweet cup of tea".

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Like most people, I learn from my mistakes. For instance, I learnt a strong lesson from the following experience. I was working with a man that I will call Bill. Bill lived in a psychiatric institution for more than twenty years and I met him six years ago when he expressed interest in attending some story-sharing groups and informal workshops being run by our small organization. He needed permission for leave from his doctors, and some protocols were agreed upon before we could welcome him to the group. We could see that Bill needed someone who could stand beside him and become an ally. We thought that a man called Gary, who was already coming to some of the activities, would fit that role, and he agreed. Over the following three years Gary kept in touch with Bill. He visited him regularly, spent many hours talking with him and made arrangements with health authorities for Bill's leave as well as arranging transport to group activities.

At the end of three years, Gary's own circumstances changed and he was unable to commit to his role as Bill's ally and we wanted to find other ways of supporting Bill. I talked to a few people who knew Bill and we searched for ideas. One day I was having coffee with a man named Joe who knew and respected Bill. He had an idea that we both became excited about. Joe plays for a football club and he had the idea of inviting Bill to attend games and to help carry the water to players. We thought Bill might like that role: he would be with other males, outdoors in a sporting context, and would be making a contribution in a genuine way. Bill liked the idea and so did the hospital team that provided health services to Bill.

Then I made my mistake. It was decided that Joe would approach the president of the club to check out the idea with him. Joe knew the president and felt there wouldn't be a problem. However, the president balked and said he would need to go to the management committee. As soon as this happened I knew I had erred. As many of us know, committees are places where ideas are lured and then slowly strangled. I had forgotten some earlier learning: if you go to the leaders of an organization in a one-off fashion, you will usually be talking with people who are struggling to manage the complexities of that organization, and who will therefore probably not be open to ideas about including a person who has support needs or who could be highly stigmatized. I had learnt that it was generally more effective to firstly work with someone who is supportive, and who can generate an informal welcome before seeking formal approval - a general club member. Sure enough, the committee said, "No, Not viable."

I wish now that we had simply taken Bill to a few football games, let him hang around Joe and his mates, gradually getting to know them, and meeting the coach informally. Within the context of established relationships, we could then have looked for an opportunity for Bill to be a water-bottle carrier on a day when someone was needed. Letting team members get to know Bill on a first-hand basis might have been a more effective approach.

FINDING ALLIES

Finding allies for a marginalized person remains one of the most effective ways of connecting someone to a group or community. People who struggle with mental health issues are often overwhelmed by the large mental health system that they encounter. In contrast, community connections are small-scale and intimate. Although simplicity is at the heart of community connections, each person who is involved in community-connecting actions needs encouragement. The following are some specific ways in which they can be encouraged:

- Recognizing that the first step towards including someone in the community is through attentive, responsive conversation;
- Affirming and honouring the involvement of “amateurs”; those people in our communities who are grounded, practical, and can offer friendship;
- Encouraging these grounded people to become an expert – not so much an expert about a person’s diagnosis, medications, mental health history or the science of psychiatry – but an expert in understanding the life experiences, hopes and struggles of the person that they stand beside;
- Encouraging people to focus on simple and ordinary things – the beauty, life and divinity that can be found in the everyday, the ordinary and the obscure.
- Recognizing that recovery is often more about a person marshalling inner resources and working in partnership with others than it is about “getting better” or “being cured”; and
- Trying to find moments of openness. Community connectors can identify and find moments of openness that can occur at times of crisis, celebration, change or chance. The aim is not to push doors open when people want them closed but to work with moments of openness when they occur. (The work of Dave Andrews describes this concept well.)

CONCLUSION

The importance of using a simple approach should not obscure the critical nature of community building efforts: they are about threads of love and care that build our interconnectedness, our sense of identity, our hopes and dreams. They are indeed the threads that connect us to our own selves. They are not to be romanticized or seen as utopian. The threads of community that we might be working with are not the answers to our suffering and ailments.

Community will not cure affliction or disability, but community does give us an enriched context within which we can live out our ailments, our struggles, our suffering and our joys. Jack Yates expresses it this way: “Community is the only uncontrolled space, the only place you can sing together, and the only place you can die together, the

only place you can never abolish suffering, and the only place you can never abolish joy.”

The most precious resource we have for coping with life in an unstable, discontinuous and revolutionary world is not information, but each other.

(Hugh Mackay)

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Shula Rice.

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