

On Connecting and Belonging



"This work is more art than science. The solution is as likely to come from your imagination as from your rational mind. It's not a matter of designing programs but of creating visions, not of following protocols but fulfilling dreams. And believing in those dreams: believing that a woman who has been isolated could still have friends, or that a man whose life has been controlled could still escape and be free. Trusting that vision means learning to hope. This work is not about "fixing" people so they fit into society. You need to come at the question from another side: finding the place, or the way that people do fit." (O'Connell 1988:18}



The work described here is primarily about connecting. It is about the weaving of a social fabric of love and friendliness.

We are realising that 'a place to belong' is anywhere and everywhere. One woman reports that she feels 'a place to belong' in the group of people with whom she walks each morning. Another man who has been a long term resident at a psychiatric hospital reports that, now he is living in the suburbs, his friendship with a local woman we helped him meet is "like a lovely cup of tea." Another woman we know feels a deep sense of connection with the trees and plants she greets in her back garden early each morning.

The perspective argued here implies that there is no easy way to package 'community', no single formula or standard text book which explains how we can build community connectedness. Some of the implications of our perspective are:

- this perspective uplifts the place of 'amateurs'. This term needs to be reclaimed in the mental health arena where things are often left to the professionals. No matter how ignorant we may feel and be about the science of psychiatry 'amateurs' can play a significant role in people's lives by 'being there',
- this perspective uplifts the place of seemingly 'small' and 'insignificant' processes and events. Having someone know your name or say "g'day" can be a significant event if you want to be known.
- this perspective uplifts the value of people knowing people -on a variety of levels. By greeting others, by including others in our hearts and homes, and by supporting activities that enable people to meet others. we are increasing the possibilities for people to develop a sense of connectedness.
- this perspective validates the different ways that each unique individual wants to belong.

Connecting (as opposed to not being connected, aloneness, loneliness) for people occurs in different ways -

**physical (sharing activities),
emotional (sharing experiences),
intellectual (sharing ideas) and
spiritual (sharing values) (Leong: 1997)**

Those of us concerned about community connections may find this framework useful as different people prefer to connect in different ways. It is helpful to find out how a person wants to connect with others before facilitating those connections.

It may also be useful to consider the levels at which each person connects -connecting with self, . with others, and with a greater scheme of things. (Rowland 1998:10) All three levels have been documented as significant for people recovering from psychiatric trauma. (Hatfield 1993:30,138, 143, 147; Fallot 1998:35).

LEVELS ON WHICH PEOPLE CONNECT

Connecting with self

Examples -

- enjoying solitude
- regaining a clearer sense of self after a period of psychiatric trauma
- achieving congruence (ie living a life that fits with one's feelings and values)

Connecting with others

Examples -

- creating spaces of hospitality in one's life
- sharing who one is with others
- building the friendships one already has

Connecting with a greater scheme of things

Examples -

- getting involved in a movement for social change
- finding something outside oneself to give meaning to life eg commitment to community or family
- developing one's spirituality

Some of the processes that we have seen nurture a sense of belonging for different people include:

- **having some people know one's name**
- **having a contribution to make**
- **being known and recognized in one's neighbourhood**
- **having a publicly valued role**
- **rebuilding with one's family**
- **having someone to out with**
- **becoming an official member of a club**
- **having a paid job**
- **having someone who welcomes one to their home for a meal**
- **having a unique contribution to make to an organization or group**
- **doing a mutually enjoyable activity with someone**
- **having access to pets and animals**
- **gaining access to one's own private living space**

A useful summary is that belonging is often about.:

- **having something to do**
- **having someone to do it with and**
- **having something to look forward to**

Issues of connection and belonging and contribution are critical for many people in our modern societies -people who are unemployed, people who are refugees or migrants, indigenous people, people with disabilities, people who are sick, aged people...as well as people living with mental health challenges.

Main Points

'a place to belong' is anywhere and everywhere

connectedness can occur through 'amateurs' getting alongside others and through seemingly small and insignificant and ordinary processes