

# The Abundant Community

By John McKnight and Peter Block

This is a 10,000 foot view of John McKnight and Peter Block's book a collection of quotes and ideas that will give you an idea about what an abundant community is and hopefully encourage you to read the whole book before we meet on November 16, 2011.

According to McKnight and Block, neighborhoods are the primary source of our health, in all forms – economic, environmental, and social. Through the giving of gifts we each possess, our abundance, coming together, associating around common interests, connecting self organizing, and making even the outsider feel welcome, we can build local places where the citizen is empowered, and the influence of institutions is diminished. Basically, the premise is we have what we need, in our own local places, and it is enough to live a satisfied life, in relation with others.

From the Abundant Community website:

We are discovering that it takes a village to do more than raise a child. It is the key to a satisfying life. It turns out we need our neighbors and a community to be healthy, produce jobs, protect the land, and care for the elderly and those on the margin. Our consumer society constantly tells us that we are insufficient and that we must purchase what we need from specialists and systems outside the community. We outsource our health care, childcare, recreation, safety, and satisfaction. We are trained to become consumers and clients, not citizens and neighbors. John McKnight and Peter Block take a thoughtful look at how this situation came about, what maintains it, and the crippling effect it has had on our families, our communities, and our environment. Right in our neighborhood we have the capacity to address our human needs in ways that systems, which see us only as interchangeable units, as problems to be solved, never can. We all have gifts to offer, even the most seemingly marginal among us. This book suggests how to nurture voluntary, self organizing structures that will reveal these gifts and allow them to be shared to the greatest mutual benefit. Block and McKnight recommend roles we can assume and actions we can take to reweave the social fabric that has been unraveled by consumerism and its belief that however much we have, it is not enough. Each neighborhood has people with the gifts and talents needed to provide for our prosperity and peace of mind — this book offers practical ways to discover them. It reminds us of our power to create a hope filled life. It assures us that ultimately we can be the architects of the future where we want to live.

Health, safety, environment, economy, food, children, and care are the seven responsibilities of an abundant community and its citizens.

The authors continue with definitions:

**Association** is three or more people who come together by choice and mostly without pay because of a common interest. The common interest may be simply to be together, or it may be to change the world.

A **neighborhood** is the place where you live and sleep. It could be your block or the square mile surrounding where you live. It may or may not have a name.

The word **community** is more difficult, but we use it as a general term to describe what occurs outside systems and institutions. It also refers to an aggregation of people or neighborhoods that have something in common. It is both a place and an experience of connectedness. When we use the term community competence, we mean the capacity of the place where we live to be useful to us, to support us in creating those things that can only be produced in the surroundings of a connected community. When we talk of a community way, it is all of the above: people outside institutions, connected by choice and usually affection, who together decide what they want to participate in creating

They note two paths available to us now – consumerism and citizenship:

A **consumer** is one who has surrendered to others the power to provide what is essential for a full and satisfied life. This act of surrender goes by many names: client, patient, student, audience, fan, shopper. All customers are not citizens. Consumerism is not about shopping but about the transformation of citizens into consumers. We look at what happens to the family, the neighborhood, and the community when we make the shift from citizen to consumer. When we go to the marketplace and the professional to seek satisfaction, something happens to our capacity to prosper and find peace of mind. Our self control gives way to a system providing for our needs. But systems, while efficient and standardized and predictable, do not address the unique needs wants and desires of individual people.

A **citizen** is one who is a participant in a democracy, regardless of their legal

Rule #1: The good life is achieved through our purchasing power. Consumer society originates in the belief that the good life is defined by what we produce and what we consume.

Rule #2: To acquire the power to purchase, we must follow a certain way of life—the system way. To succeed in this consumerist world, most of us are destined to live a system life—by definition, a managed life. There is an irrevocable link between a consumer society and a system oriented society.

Rule #3: If you live the system way, it becomes who you are. The invasion of work and the system way into our lives extends beyond simply hours at a workplace. We talk about all of the labor saving devices and all of the technology that increases productivity, yet “‘work and more work’ is the accepted way of doing things” for Americans today, says Jeffrey Kaplan.<sup>13</sup> So the productivity increase has accrued purely to the benefit of the system, in spite of the ever growing ability of non people to produce stuff.

If we want to find a life of satisfaction, we will need to break these rules: Stated simply, **the price we pay** for living in a consumer world, for becoming consumers rather than citizens, is living a **dissatisfied life**; an **incomplete life**; a life where the harder we try, the more hollow our life becomes.

Individuals become useless, families lose their function, and neighborhoods lose their competence. We are then left to purchase what we might have chosen to produce. The fallacy of the consumer model is the notion that what we are seeking is, in fact, obtainable in the marketplace. While we may know intellectually that a satisfied life cannot be purchased, we have an economy whose very success counts on our dissatisfaction and is dependent on our continuous effort to make the purchase. The dominant cultural reality for developed countries is that once we become a customer in the consumer society, our dissatisfaction is guaranteed. “Customer satisfaction” has become a euphemism; it is a counterfeit promise.

The authors discuss the evolution of consumerism, the creation of markets and marketing of deception and the replacement of authentic satisfaction with manufactured – and always becoming out of date – satisfaction. And they offer an alternative; one that has worked in the past, of choosing community, choosing self reliance, choosing local, choosing relationships.

They identify 7 essential elements of a satisfying environment: Safety and security, health, an enterprising economy, food, children and care.

And they illustrate local, available options for fulfilling these basic needs in a way that is sustainable and life affirming

### **Choosing a Satisfied Life**

**The abundant community has basic tenants. These are:**

What we have is enough – in regard to our person and our possessions.  
We have the capacity to provide what we need.  
We organize our world in a context of cooperation and satisfaction.  
We are responsible for each other.  
We live with the reality of the human condition – we understand what we can and can't do.

**The abundant community has three universal properties**

At the heart of our movement are three universal properties. The giving of gifts, the presence of association and the compassion of hospitality. A community becomes powerful and competent when it awakens these properties. They become the source of power in families and neighborhoods.

**The Giving of Gifts**—The gifts of the people in our neighborhood are boundless. Our movement calls forth those gifts.

**The Presence of Association**—In association we join our gifts together, and they become amplified, magnified, productive, and celebrated.

**The Compassion of Hospitality**—We welcome strangers because we value their gifts and need to share our own. Our doors are open. There are no strangers here, just friends we haven't met  
These are the properties of a community of abundance. There is no limit to our gifts, our associations, and our hospitality.

**These properties create the conditions for certain capacities to emerge:**

Kindness  
Generosity  
Cooperation  
Forgiveness  
Fallibility  
Mystery

When giving association and hospitality are embraced, and the properties above emerge, a community develops competence – a competence based on abundance, bringing people together around possibility, not disappointment.

Creating competence starts with making visible the gifts of everyone in the neighborhood – families, the old and young vulnerable people and those considered troublesome. This inventory of community resources is comprised of the elements needed to create a satisfying life.

Knowing each other's gifts creates the opportunity to work together, support each other, provide real care and create real value. And the exchange of gifts, the giving and getting creates opportunities for healthy association. An association is a means to make power in the community: the power to decide what needs to and can be done; the power to decide how we can do it; the power to join with one's neighbors to do what needs to be done.

As association develops, a significant role is that of “connector.” Connectors are the people who are able to bring people and resources together, who recognize opportunities and have the social skills to connect with people. A “Connectors’