

The Changing Nature of Community and Neighbourhood

*"In genuine community
there are no sides."*
- M. Scott Peck

"Community" is one of the most heavily used, and perhaps one of the most misused words in our 21st century vocabulary. We used the word in the opening paragraph of this booklet, and will use it many more times in this series. Yet because of its many popular uses, the word often has little real meaning – it becomes a shell for whatever we want to pour into it. As M. Scott Peck writes,

"We tend to speak of our hometowns as communities. Or of the churches in our towns as communities. Our hometowns may well be geographical collections of human beings with tax and political structures in common, but precious little else relates them to each other. Towns are not, in any meaningful sense of the word, communities. And sight unseen, on the basis of my experience with many Christian churches in this country, I can be fairly confident that each of the churches in your hometown is not likely to be much of a community either."

"While on the one hand we bandy about the word 'community' in such a shallow, meaningless way, many of us simultaneously long for 'the good old days' when frontier neighbors gathered together to build one another's barns. We mourn the loss of community."

(1990, p. i).

Peck doesn't want us to discard the concept of community, just to give it its due respect. Community is defined as "a unified body of individuals" and "people with common interests" (Miriam-Webster, 2002). With changes in communications technology, we are increasingly recognizing that participants in a community don't necessarily have to live or work in the same geographic area. However, the ubiquity of the word tells us that we all wish to feel a sense of community in our lives – of being unified with others who share our interests.

Perhaps our heavy use of the word community is tied to the decline of 'the real thing.' American sociologist Robert Putnam presents a rigorously documented portrait of the decline of community

in his book *Bowling Alone* (2000). Putnam shows that Americans (and citizens of at least some other western societies, likely including Canada) have become increasingly disconnected from one another. Our involvement in social organizations has been decreasing since the 1950s. Putnam believes that the bonds created in neighbourhood and community organizations are crucial to our development as a society.

Putnam and others document a decline in our 'social capital.'

"Social capital refers to the intangible social features of community life – such as trust and co-operation between individuals and within groups, actions and behaviour expected from community members, networks of interaction between community members, and actions taken by community members for reasons other than financial motives or legal obligations – that can potentially contribute to the wellbeing of that community" (Mitchell, 1999). Why are we less engaged? Think about how five key factors have changed our lives:

1. generational change – the greatest factor – the tendency for lower levels of religious observance, trust, following the news, and voting among younger generations
2. work changes – particularly the pressures of two-income families
3. urban sprawl – our physical separation, the necessity of travel to work, school, and our city centres
4. television – has 'privatized' our leisure time
5. the combined effect of generational change and television – the creation of a generation that values individuality more highly than social interaction, in everything from forms of entertainment to concepts of community (Putnam, 2000).

Of course, other forms of interaction have arisen. "The clearest exceptions to the trend toward civic disengagement are:

- 1) the rise in youth volunteering...;
- 2) the growth in telecommunication, particularly the Internet;
- 3) the vigorous growth of grassroots activity among evangelical conservatives; and
- 4) the increase in self-help support groups" (p. 180).

Yet Putnam points out that the nature of these interactions is different. They are essentially more passive and / or more focused on individual rights and individual fulfillment than were the types of social interactions that are fading away.

Why is this important? Putnam describes in detail “hard evidence that our schools and neighborhoods don’t work so well when community bonds slacken” (p. 27).

The nature of political activism has also changed, Putnam notes: “‘cooperative’ forms of behavior, like serving on committees, have declined more rapidly than ‘expressive’ forms of behavior, like writing letters” (p. 45). As Putnam points out, “collaborative forms of political involvement engage broader public interests, whereas expressive forms are more individualistic and correspond to more narrowly defined interests” (p. 45). In development scenarios, our planning and political processes are therefore heavily influenced by “grievances” – complaints about how the development will adversely affect the individual or small group – rather than a sense of the collective or community good.

Though Putnam’s book is subtitled “The collapse and revival of American community,” the revival he speaks of in the book’s final chapter would more accurately be characterized as a wish.

While social conditions in Canada have many parallels with those in the United States, a recent study by Statistics Canada suggests we hold our neighbourhoods in high regard. “Leisurely chats over the fence with neighbours are probably much less frequent than they were a generation ago,” the study notes, “yet, in general, respondents view their neighbourhoods in a very positive light.” About 90% of people living in single detached homes felt their neighbours were willing to help each other.

(Statistics Canada, 1999)