

The Genius of Community

In York Region, and Beyond

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Here's a question:

What if we could invent a machine that could make us healthier, happier, safer and smarter; reduce crime, prolong our lives, make our kids do better in school and improve their overall life chances?

That would be a machine worth inventing, right? Well--it's already been invented. Know what it's called? It's called community....Or perhaps more accurately: good community.

Good communities foster strong bonds of trust, engagement and social connectedness. These bonds are called social capital. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the term. It got popularized with the publication of a book a number of years ago called "Bowling Alone" by the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam. The book was based on groundbreaking research of social connectedness in America and its correlation to key indicators of social and personal well-being. (The researchers measured social connectedness and developed what they called The Social Capital Index for every State in the US. (Since then, more fine-grained studies looking at these variables at the neighbourhood level. And studies are being carried out around the world now, too.)

There has been a substantial - Putnam says "precipitous" - weakening of social bonds and civic participation over the last two decades of the 20th century. Now, while the cumulative plotline of these measures is pretty linear over time, it is not so over space. It turns out that social capital varies pretty dramatically across the length and breadth of America.

It's worth revisiting some of the staggering findings in Putnam's research just to remind ourselves how important good community is:

First let's look at the well-being of children and youth. If they are in places where Social capital is high, babies are born healthier, fare better in their early years and mature into youth with much less risk than their counterparts in places where these conditions do not prevail. The research examined indicators like:

- Percent of low birth-weights;
- The infant mortality rate;
- The death rate for children aged 1 -4;
- Deaths per 100,000 teens by accident, homicide and suicide;
- Teen birth rates;
- Percent of teens 16 - 19 who are high school dropouts;
- And juvenile violent crime arrest rates.

All of these problem indicators are consistently and considerably lower than in states with low social capital. Indeed, Putnam's analysis shows that **social capital is second only to poverty in the breadth and depth of its effects on children's lives**. Same when it comes to child abuse rates. Same too for educational performance - from elementary schools all the way through college. **No matter how affluent the community, if social connectedness is lacking, students and schools perform less well.**

Next, Putnam looks at neighbourhood safety and crime rates. Again, the correlation to social capital is powerful. States that rank low on social capital rank high on crime, and vice versa. This is equally true at the neighbourhood level. The strongest predictor of the murder rate in any given place – stronger than poverty or ethnicity – is a low level of social capital. And Studies in various large urban centres - both in the U.S. and the U.K. – also show that in neighbourhoods where people are connected and active in social networks, the incidence of muggings, assaults, burglaries and auto thefts is considerably lower.

Then there's the connection between social capital and health and well-being. This, claims Putnam, is where he found the very strongest consequences of social capital. In fact, he says, the positive contributions of social capital rival in strength the detrimental contributions of well-established biomedical risk factors like smoking, obesity, elevated blood pressure, and physical inactivity. Statistically speaking, the evidence for the health consequences of social connectedness is as strong today as was the evidence for the health consequences of smoking at the time of the first surgeon general's report on smoking." (Says Putnam: Quitting smoking or joining a club, it's a tough call which would improve your life expectancy more.Joining and participating in one group cuts your odds of dying over the next year in half. Joining two groups cuts it by three quarters.

There's more: Over the last 20 years more than a dozen large international studies have shown that "people who are socially disconnected are between two and five times more likely to die from all causes, compared with matched individuals who have close ties with family, friends and community".

Finally, when it comes to emotional well-being, Putnam says that "the single most common finding from a half century's research on the correlates of life satisfaction, not only in the United States but around the world, is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections".

John Helliwell, one of Canada's leading social scientists, has been working with Putnam and conducting research around the world. The strongest predictor of self-reported well-being and happiness from neighbourhood to neighbourhood is - wait for it - NOT how much money you have, but the extent to which you think your neighbours can be trusted.

You know, I've been doing work in the field of social change for my entire career. I've worked on a very wide spectrum of issues, but I guess you could boil it down to this: well-being. How can we create conditions and take action that foster rather than compromise our well-being and the well-being of others. And all this work has led me to two central conclusions - two things that matter profoundly for our pursuit of well-being in the 21st century:

1. **Place matters profoundly.** As the social capital research shows, it has a dramatic effect on our lives and quality of life and life prospects.
2. **Innovation matters profoundly** - the ability to change the game - disrupt, make leaps forward, try and do differently – tackle big problems - find bold solutions.

So here's my contention: places - cities - because that's where more than 50% of the world's population now lives, have to become the innovation engines of the 21st century.

In support of this, I did some research for this talk – and my colleagues Aaron and Brijpal did much of this. I set the question: “Can a city be a genius?” It's the trademark we are going to use for a big initiative we hope to launch in the near future. And we found story after story of places that are breaking through. It's not the conventional narrative. Normally we hear the stories that are problem-focused - stories of despair, dysfunction, disenfranchisement. The story that's all loaded up with data about the problem, that's entirely focused on what's wrong. I think it's a debilitating story. A story that dampens our spirit, and limits our imagination...and our courage. The more we tell that story, the more we convince ourselves that we are stuck.

But we are not stuck.

Big change is possible.

A city can be a genius.

And I want to offer what I call some “proofs of possibility.” Let me tell you a few quick stories. Each one deserves a much more in-depth telling, but I think you’ll get the picture.

First, **Greensburg, Kansas:** It was flattened by one of the worst tornadoes ever to hit in the US, in 2007. The whole town was reduced to rubble. But despite the fact that just about everyone in the town had lost everything, despite the trauma, the town came together - leaders and citizens. They organized a series of community conversations - called Public Square - to develop a vision for the place they wanted to rebuild. And despite the fact that Greensburg is smack dab in the heart of conservative America - where there are very few tree-huggers - and in fact very few trees to hug - they determined that they wanted to be a sustainable community — an “Eco-town”. Before the tornado, Greensburg was slowly dying, like so many rural towns in America. But after the tornado - along with inspired community leadership and deep community participation – Greensburg has reinvented itself. Today it is known as the greenest city on Earth. And other places, from Alabama to Hunan China look to the Greensburg model as they plan their own future.

Or the city of **Surat**, in **India**: one of the fastest growing cities in the country—with a population of close to 5 million people (it’s nearly doubled in a decade). 20 years ago it was one of India’s filthiest cities - a city that was “floating on sewage water.” 40% of Surat’s population lives in slums, having no drainage system whatsoever. Not surprisingly, the city has always been fertile ground for epidemics and water-borne diseases like malaria, cholera and hepatitis. Then, in 1994 - it was like something out of the Middle Ages - there was an outbreak of the Plague in Surat. It took health authorities by surprise—and raised concerns around the globe. This spurred the city into action. The efforts involved unprecedented levels of cooperation in Surat - government and non-government organizations, hospitals, business, and individual households. In other words, it required a massive civic mobilization effort. The transformation in a 2-year period was nothing short of amazing. Among other things,

- They went from collecting less than 50% of the garbage the city generated every day to a 95% collection rate.
- They went from 85% of the city without a sewage system to 85% with.
- They brought about an 80% decrease in both diarrhoeal and respiratory infections.

And instead of having the distinction as one of India’s filthiest cities, Surat has now been judged “the second cleanest city” in the country. There was also a real normative shift in citizen attitudes and behaviour - a shift from acquiescence to active participation in keeping the city clean and healthy. Cleanliness is now seen not only as a mutual priority, but a mutual responsibility. And this shift seems to have had a dramatic impact on both the morale and the reputation of Surat.

Then there's **Harlem** — endemic generational poverty, driven into deeper dysfunction in the 80s and early 90s by crack cocaine, gangs, violence, crumbling health, failing schools and chronic health problems - a spiral of decline. Lots of programs - some isolated successes - but overall, to quote Geoffrey Canada, “started to feel that the kids I was seeing in kindergarten in Harlem were already doomed, destined to spend their lives stuck at the bottom.” So he started an initiative he called the Harlem Children's Zone. At first it encompassed a 24 block area ...and now it has expanded to almost 100 blocks. Many thousands of kids. The focus - the mission - is “to close the black-white achievement gap” and to do whatever it takes to get Harlem kids into college and successfully through college. What it takes is a lot. Much of the effort is on schools - but the initiative is really a lot more comprehensive than that. It engages the whole community at lots of levels. Everything from an ingenious program called Baby College - that teaches parenting skills and helps ensure that children are school-ready..to a youth mentoring and role-modeling program ...to a health program that focuses on childhood asthma: In Harlem nearly one in three children had asthma symptoms. The Asthma Initiative alone has produced amazing results: a 400% drop in the number of asthma-related emergency room visits; the number of hospital stays required for asthma has been dropped to zero; the number of children who have missed school because of asthma has been decreased from 25% to 8%. These are not incremental changes, but transformational ones.

Like the Asthma Initiative, the whole HCZ program has entailed massive coordinated community work - from service providers and citizens alike. At the level of school performance, which is really the ‘coal face’ for Geoffrey Canada and his colleagues – the indicators and outcomes they care about the most - the results are breakthrough: 100% of kids in the pre-Kindergarten program are now school-ready. And 90% of the kids in the high-school program have been accepted into the college in the 2009-2010 academic year. Fundamentally, in a few short years they have managed to eliminate the black-white achievement gap in New York (a gap that was huge). And in doing so, they have dispelled the myth that this gap was and would forever be a fact of life.

And it seems to be changing the spirit of the whole community. Fostering a sense that things are not hopeless. That the community can—and is—having a real effect on reversing the destiny that endemic poverty seemed to have written for it.

The results are still not conclusive. And some of the approaches are controversial. And of course there are still many problems related to entrenched poverty in Harlem. But the Harlem Children’s Zone has been called “the most ambitious and hopeful solution to urban poverty in the country.” And Roland Fryer, a tough-minded economist from Harvard who studied the program, said - and I quote: “The study has changed my life as a scientist... I am no longer interested in marginal changes ... The Harlem Children’s Zone has produced enormous gains... the equivalent of curing cancer for these kids - because so many of our kids are dying, literally and figuratively.” And in 2008 President Obama said that he wanted to replicate the Harlem Children’s Zone model in 20 other cities throughout the country.

And then there’s **Bogotá**. The city of Bogotá in **Colombia**. A city of 7 million inhabitants that was renowned for corrupt governance, urban chaos and violent crime has become – over the last 15 years – a model for visionary politics, civic engagement and progressive urban planning.

- They’ve reduced their murder rate by close to 75%.
- They’ve reduced water usage by 40%.
- They’ve increased school enrollment by over 30%.

They’ve implemented car-free days...created a world-class bus system...built a thousand public parks...300 km of bicycle and foot paths, and, over the next ten years, are planning to build 3000 km more. Their vision is to transform the city from a place for cars to a place for people, believing that hospitable public space is an essential ingredient for a safe, healthy and democratic society. According to the UN, Bogotá has emerged as “a model for transport and democracy for cities around the world.”

This phenomenon has come to be known as the *Bogotá Experiment*, and indeed, over the last 15 years, the city has been a laboratory for civic innovation and risk-taking approaches to major problems. While they have been having a stunning impact on practical problems, the biggest change, in fact, might be psychological. In 2005, Mayor Enrique Penalosa said: “we’ve changed from a city that was almost despised by its inhabitants, where we were really hopeless and people thought that the worst thing that had happened to them in life was to have to live here, into a city where people are proud to live...where they can have a dream and make that dream a reality.”

Well, you may say yeah but that’s not here. What do those different and distant places have to do with *our* place - with York Region? It’s true - those places are all very different -- different countries, different cultures, different politics, different circumstances ...different challenges they’re addressing. But here’s the relevance, here is what is the same: Each of these examples is a story of people tackling significant problems together, problems that affect quality of life and well-being, convening around possibilities for a better future...and breaking through. That’s how it’s exactly the same. That’s the red thread between those places, Bogotá, Greensburg, Harlem and Surat, and your place. York Region.

And though they are stories of elsewhere, the characters in those stories who shifted their journey from the path of what’s wrong to the path of what’s possible, are mere mortals, not any different from you or me. They are like the members of the Human Services Planning Board of York Region — people who care deeply about the well-being of their community and who have come together to do something about it. Something ambitious. Something meaningful.

I was privileged to sit in a meeting with the HSPB several weeks ago and I can’t tell you how much I admire the spirit and sense of purpose that I encountered in that group of your fellow citizens. What I encountered was champions of change in York Region — a group of leaders who have come together to work beyond the boundaries of their respective institutions...profoundly

committed to the future well-being of York Region... dedicated to brave, creative and collaborative approaches... unanimous about what has to be tackled first. And my sense was—very clearly—that although there are very real problems here that must be addressed; it is not the problems that define York Region. It's the response to those problems. A creative, collaborative, can-do community now dedicated to working on what matters ... in ways that matter.

And driven by a spirit of possibility that reflects the stories I have just told.

This is what we need if cities are going to be the innovation engines of the 21st century. And I think that what's happening right here in York Region is at the leading edge.

I did a little more research for this talk. Besides the examples of other places breaking through, demonstrating bold pattern-shifting innovation, I wanted to see whether there was a pattern or set of principles that seemed to underscore this kind of work. And I found this fantastic report - as though it had been developed for our purposes - that came out in the US a couple of years ago. It's called "Public Innovators: Forces for Social Change and Civic Renewal." (Prepared by the Harwood Institute.) A year-long study, based on in-depth interviews with people who have been involved in significant change in communities right across the US.

Who are these public innovators? Well, some of them are formal leaders - city managers, and heads of social service organizations and agencies. And some of them are just active citizens. But they are acting together to produce extraordinary change. At the heart of it, their work is impelled by an animating sense of public purpose and moral responsibility.

The study looks at " how these public innovators see themselves and their work, how they think about change, what drives them to take on intractable public problems, how they mobilize people and generate impact, and how they respond to the persistent challenges inherent in public work."

I think the findings of the study are very revealing and, I believe, highly relevant to - and congruent with - the work that is happening right here in York Region.

Here are five common themes that seem to unite the work of all these public innovators:

1. They think of change in systemic rather than piecemeal terms;
2. They recognize that community engagement is vital to everything they do;
3. They understand that community problems are complex and are not resolved by applying technical fixes but rather by learning and adapting together;
4. They deeply believe that change is not created by solving problems but rather by seeing possibilities; and
5. They have seen that the very act of coming together to make change happen goes a long way toward creating community.

What the report makes clear is that real public innovators do much more than execute a plan. Rather, they galvanize a community around a goal. They embrace a long view, engage many players and many perspectives, and through their work, unite and focus the community. They see themselves as catalysts and connectors, not managers. They build bridges - not silos, and foster new networks of trust. They advance on many fronts at once, building on what works, and changing what doesn't. They don't always build consensus - and nor do they think that's necessary: there are often divergent points of view. But what is essential is that they harness the energy and assets of the community in pursuit of a common purpose. In other words, their genius is to tap into the genius of community.

Finally, and I am quoting directly from the Report:

“Innovators bring to their work an animating sense of hope and possibility.”

A word that came up again and again in the course of the research was *hope*. Innovators recognize that the key to making change happen is to actualize a sense of possibility. In order to create something new, people have to first imagine it. But too many community conversations revolve around issues to be confronted and problems to be solved. ...Being an effective innovator requires that you help people overcome the belief that change is impossible. The shift of focus is an important one, the Innovators said, because how you do your work changes when you shift from a problem-solving to a possibility-identifying mindset...As one of the interviewees said: ‘You have to become a champion of hope. Inspiring hope has to be the main thing in everything you do. You have to always keep it at the forefront. Without that, change doesn't happen.’ “

“Hope” ... “an animating sense of possibility” ... “the genius of community” - these are not only the recurrent themes among the remarkable public innovators interviewed for this study. They were also the themes that kept coming up when I met with the HSPB several weeks ago. At that meeting, we sat in a large circle. (Just chairs - no tables, nothing separating us.) And you know what was in the centre of that circle? The future of York Region - and a bold commitment to make that future better for many of the people who live in this place - in fact for the entire place. And if you can get the whole community to see that bright light of possibility in the centre of the circle, I believe you can accomplish the extraordinary here.

What is being launched here in York Region and the way it is being approached is, for me, exactly what is necessary if cities are going to rise to the challenge of being the innovation engines of the 21st century. You are at the leading edge. And I wish you courage and good fortune on this all-important journey.

One final observation from another research study that was recently published. This is from Canada's leading and globally admired scientific body - the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. They undertook an in-depth study called Successful Societies to explore the question "Why are some societies more successful than others?" And they used mortality rates as the simplest and most objective measure of success. The findings reinforce what I was talking about at the beginning of my remarks.

Science is showing us how much place has a material effect on our well-being. The quality of the places we live and the quality of our lives are inextricably linked. Our economic resources can get us only so far up the well-being ladder. Our social resources are of equal importance. But the research also showed something else which I find of extraordinary interest.

It is not only the quality of our social connections that affects our well-being. It is also something the researchers call our "collective imaginary" – the sense of shared meaning and purpose that knits the community together. The shared narrative that subtly communicates what and who has value in the community, what it means to belong to the community, what can reasonably be expected in moral terms from others, even what is worthy of our hopes. In a very real way, these collective imaginaries tell us who we are. So you see, we not only inhabit a place. We also inhabit a narrative. And it seems that some narratives can be a lot healthier than others.

Shaping our collective narrative may just be the most important social innovation of all.

As you begin your journey here, you are also beginning a story. The future of York Region will in no small part be determined by the shape of the story you choose to tell. Think about the story you want this place to inhabit. Make it a story of hope, courage, creativity and cooperation. A story about the genius of community. This community.

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