Restoring humanity in our communities and institutions

an interview with Peter Block

Peter Block, author, consultant and citizen of Cincinnati, Ohio, describes his work as about empowerment, stewardship, chosen accountability, and the reconciliation of community. He has been a leading edge thinker in change for many years. Two of his recent books: 'The Abundant Community' (written with John McKnight, 2010), and 'Community: The Structure of Belonging' (2008), raise disturbing issues for how people and organisations engage with the big challenges we face in society. So we asked one of our Business Directors, Danny Chesterman, with Hugh Pidgeon and John Watters, to convene a conversation with Peter and reflect on what his work means for anyone who wants to make a difference.

Our colonisation by consumerism and patriarchy

In *Community: The Structure of Belonging,* Peter highlights the pervasive spread of consumerism into every corner of our lives. Whilst this has brought huge 'improvements' to the quality of millions of people's lives, it has come at a cost. The dominance of the consumer mindset has led to our creeping 'colonisation' by the sense of entitlement … from the dominant 'other'… with a consequential diminution of self and our planet. Peter picks up the theme in our conversation.

Peter: *The existing community context is one that markets fear, assigns fault, and worships self-interest… the provider-consumer transaction is the breeding ground for entitlement and it is unfriendly to our definition of citizen and the power inherent in that tradition…*

When we expect others to be in control, it is a short step to participating in a way in which we expect others to take responsibility for our wellbeing (patriarchy), idealising them and then blaming them when they fail to live up to our expectations. (Caryn Vanstone, in her article on page 27, refers to this as the child/parent dynamic).

Peter argues that we can only exert our freedom and accountability if we can shed the outdated assumptions and mindsets that have colonised our culture and ourselves.

Recreating humanising spaces

I asked Peter what scope he sees for us to recreate in organisations the sense of reciprocity and community. His reply was stark and arresting.

Peter: *I've lost faith in reforming anything that calls itself an organisation (so has John McKnight)… they inevitably dehumanise us… organisations value people less and less and yet… there's enormous hope in humanising spaces in organisations.*
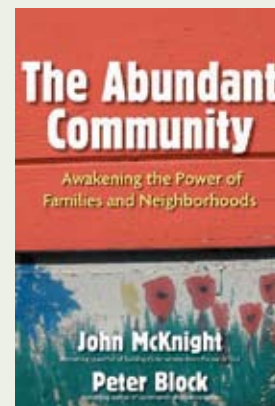
Danny: *But surely organisations are an expression of our humanity too?*

Peter: *I don't claim any more humanity than anyone working in an organisation. What dehumanises organisations is the system's design based on predictability, consistency and control. There can be experiments and exceptions locally for a while, but most often they are killed off by the system's requirement for consistency and predictability.*

My aim is to carve out spaces for human possibilities. I cannot change organisations – they have this inbuilt context, and the patriarchy is so deeply embedded in us – but I can decide every time how to occupy the room… the possibilities of occupation and habitation.

"The traditional conversations that seek to explain, study, analyse, define tools, and express the desire to change others are interesting but not powerful… we need to shift our conversations from the problems of community to the possibility of community."

The Abundant Community, 2010

Having faith in the possibilities is the antidote to our addiction to the need for predictable outcomes and futures that organisations so often seem to require.

Prediction is projection/fantasy. Predictability kills humanity. So does the thirst for perfection. Perfection is a defence against freedom. Our freedom occurs when we accept our fallibility. Stop working on it. Period.

Conversations that matter

So how do we develop the courage to deepen our awareness, shake off our redundant mind sets and be open to the possibilities in the present? It's all in the quality of our conversation. Through conversation we can enlarge the scope for individual and collective action.

Transformation and restoration occur through the power of language, how we speak and listen to each other. The conversation is not so much about the future of the community, but is the future in the making.

Danny: *How do we help people manage their anxiety and their frustration so we can create the conditions for these better quality conversations? The patience needed to do that is in really short supply.*

Peter: *The urgency for a solution is what keeps anything from changing. Anything done quickly is likely to give us more of what we've got now. So the contract you might say is only about time. Community cannot be built quickly.*

The other thought is, we know that certain conversations won't go anywhere… so the question is: Are you interested in a conversation you haven't had before? Are you willing to leave your interests, your feelings at the door? We have to change the nature of our speaking and listening to each other. It's not so much about inquiry. We have to talk about ownership, possibility, gifts, and space for dissent and when people express their dissent we do it with no expectation of response.

Powerful connection through small groups

For Peter it is the small group – three to 12 people – that is the unit of transformation, the place where a sufficient feeling of belonging is created.

Small groups are at their most powerful when they meet as part of larger gatherings, for example to create connection, to move the action forward, and for members of the small group to see and feel their relationship to the larger whole. By working with a fractal of the system you are less likely to trigger the immunity responses which all systems have to protect their boundaries.

Peter advocates that we pay more attention to how we gather: be aware that how we act as the leader/convener in setting-up the conversation, including the nature of the invitation, affects whether we fall into the same-old conversation patterns or not; experiment with how we ask powerful questions that engage people in an intimate ways; confront people with their freedom, and invite them to co-create a future possibility.

Peter: *Small groups enable me to express dissent at low risk. In them I discover I'm not as isolated as I thought… and that other people feel the same way. When you feel yourself going down a well-travelled conversational path, break into small groups and ask them what's going on? What do you have faith in? What do you know that is true?' We know the process but we don't have faith in it.*

Each small step must capture a quality of aliveness for it to be alive in the final product. The human experience of aliveness in each choice or step has as much significance as any technical, economic or purely practical consideration. I asked Peter what he meant by this quality.

Peter: *Aliveness is a state of unpredictability, mystery, and fallibility. It requires relatedness, willingness to not know, willingness to face the silence. It requires time, whatever it takes versus how long will this take. What kills aliveness is our need for consistency and control, love of speed, love of knowing and certainty, relationships being transactional, needing to scale up, be performance-oriented, feeling 'I must get it right'.*

Danny: *This sounds like more than a skill, it sounds like a way of participating, of bringing in your whole self – including your frailties and vulnerabilities as well as your gifts and your capabilities.*

Peter: *It's an art. I'm committed to bringing art into the process of transformation … I think that is our collective work.*

Gifts not deficits

Peter's approach to conversations aims at building community: where people show up by invitation rather than by mandate and experience an authentic relatedness; where the focus is on the communal possibility and the creation of a feeling of ownership and accountability even though others may be in charge; where diversity and dissent are given space; commitments are made without barter or coercion; and where the gifts and contributions of each member are acknowledged and valued.

"The traditional conversations that seek to explain, study, analyse, define tools, and express the desire to change others are interesting but not powerful… we need to shift our conversations from the problems of community to the possibility of community." (The Abundant Community, 2010)

This involves shifting the focus from conversations about needs and deficits to resources and gifts. Instead of becoming more and more expert about needs and deficits, and less and less able to meet them, Peter advocates that we start to draw out where non-financial resources may lie dormant or invisible in the system.

Rethinking the role of top leaders

It also means challenging our current mindset that we habitually see top leaders to be cause and all others to be effect; this belief still seems to drive much leadership thinking and is sustained by organisations, the media, politicians, and so on.

He points out the implications of this assumption.

Peter: *That way, leaders are foreground, while citizens, followers, players and anyone else not in a leadership position, are background. This love of leaders limits our capacity to create an alternative future. It proposes that the only real accountability in the world is to the top. The effect of buying into this view of leadership is that it lets citizens off the hook and breeds dependency and entitlement. What is missing or dismissed are the community-building insights about how groups work, the power of relatedness, and what occurs when ordinary people get together.*

We discussed how often when you get people together in the room the habitual refrain is that the wrong people are in the room – 'We need all the Tops here'.

Peter: *There is no top. Top implies someone who has the power and control to create an alternative future. When someone says the wrong people are in the room it points to their helplessness, their lack of faith in themselves. However high you go, there's no one who isn't answerable to someone else, no one who has all the power.*

Danny: *That's true, that's always been my experience.*

Peter: *Whoever is in the room is enough. The important thing is to get a variety of voices in the room. If some of the Tops show up, that's great, they can participate. But I'd rather make sure there are enough people from the lower levels and the margins there. Change doesn't start at the Top. I get asked all the time questions about the Tops. 'What would you have the Board of Directors do to bring more ethical financial accountability into this company?' I say to myself, why would I start with the Board of Directors? If you want something new to happen that's the last place I would go. So this is the challenge for OD – to be more Middle-Minded, more Citizen-Minded. This has been the drive behind these last two books.*

We reflected on how easily those at the top can stop things from happening yet how hard it was for them to make things happen.

Peter: *It's asymmetrical at the top. Tops don't have the power to create something but they can kill things off. You can't make a tree grow but you can cut it down. Mostly I tell the Tops to get out of the way. Any Top member who wants to get involved I welcome as a participant; we need their point of view in the room; we don't need their decisiveness.*

Peter is sensitive to the way we can unwittingly legitimise the dominant distribution of power and how different forms of privilege then get embedded into our relationships, thus constraining the field of possibility. He comments that it's what we expect of our institutions that make them what they are.

What does this mean for people in the change business?

Danny: *When clients talk to me about achieving large-scale system change they can focus very strongly on levers and organisational structures, and then my sense of aliveness of the change process goes right down. It feels very hard to interrupt this conversation. It takes courage to shift those conversations doesn't it?*

Peter: *It doesn't require courage. It requires clarity. I know legislation and system-wide changes should follow the transformation – they can't produce it.*

We have to change the nature of the conversation and the narrative. This has to be done in manageable-size units with those people interested in making a change. It can't be legislated or mandated from above.

This work of opening up conversations that are more generative is surprisingly difficult. It needs careful preparation, sensitive facilitation and the ability to let go of power and control. It's not glamorous, but it is the work Peter argues we need to increasingly do together. That way, we stand a chance of restoring humanity on our streets, in our homes, and in our institutions.