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## Foreword

*Parker J. Palmer*

When someone asks where we live, we normally respond by naming a city and perhaps a state or county. If we know and trust that person, we might share our street address.

But if the question goes deeper—“No, really, *where* do you live? Tell me about the community you call home”—and we can’t offer much more than GPS coordinates, is there a *there* there for us? If we don’t have a story to tell about the people and the human and natural history to be found just beyond our front door, do we really *live* there?

Many of us are hard-pressed to provide color commentaries on our own neighborhoods, and for that we pay a price. Our disconnection from “people and place” diminishes our quality of life. It’s one of the root causes of a range of personal and political pathologies in today’s industrialized societies.

Isolation and the loneliness that comes with it lead to illnesses of the mind and body. In an interactive community, where people know enough about one another to notice and care, those maladies would arise less often and be treated sooner when they do. Disconnection also means there’s no “We the People” to shape their collective fate or hold power accountable. Authoritarian rulers work hard to separate people from one another by

fanning the flames of mutual suspicion that burn civic community to the ground, leaving them free to rule as they will.

If these are among the concerns that led you to pick up this book, you were well led. John McKnight and Cormac Russell are leading advocates and practitioners of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), a movement that's been challenging and changing the thinking of everyone who works in the field of community development since 1993, when McKnight and John Kretzmann published the groundbreaking *Building Communities from the Inside Out*.

The ABCD movement is a practical and proven response to the failure of external approaches to community issues: Give the "experts" a lot of money and they will solve problems that ordinary citizens can't solve. As more than a few "urban renewal" efforts show, that arrogant, materialistic top-down approach has led to millions of wasted dollars and more than a few tragic consequences.

Positive and persistent social transformation always involves local residents finding ways to pool and invest their gifts in a common cause. But if that's going to happen, we first need to develop the X-ray vision and imagination that will allow us to see the human gifts that are so often hidden in plain sight. That's where the ABCD approach begins. It then proceeds to strategy and on-the-ground action as people seek to connect with one another, humanize their communities, and democratize their nation.

For me, ABCD's credibility as a movement is enhanced by the fact that it excludes no one in its approach, as illustrated by its work with people with developmental disabilities. McKnight tells a moving story about his friend Pat Worth, who had been labeled "mentally retarded" in his youth and warehoused in an institution. Pat managed to shed that label and escape from that place and build a new life, as he said, "through chance and good fortune."

Eventually, Pat had the vision for People First, which has grown into an international self-advocacy organization for people with disabilities. In Pat's words, "We are not disabled. We are 'dis' but not disabled; we're disconnected. We don't need services, we need community."

The last three words in that powerful statement apply to all of us. But unlike Pat Worth, a lot of us think of ourselves as powerless to do anything about it. We feel trapped by powerful external forces that make disconnection our lot, from segregated neighborhoods to economic forces that deprive us of personal and communal time.

Nothing worthy can happen when we give away our birthright gift of human agency. When we gather with others to build a better life together, whatever agency we have at our command multiplies many times over and builds collective confidence in our capacity to restore our common life. That's where this book can take us, with its well-tested array of tools and strategies for reclaiming and exercising agency in the creation of connected neighborhoods and communities.

This act of recovery begins where all creativity begins: in active imagination. Imagine, for a moment, all that may be hidden in the space beyond your front door. As the authors suggest, that very likely includes the following:

The skills, knowledge, passions, and experiences of neighbors whose names you don't recall or barely know. The informal clubs and groups that you are not a member of. The local institutions that contribute in small but important ways that you never hear about. The physical gems that lay hidden in the built and natural environment, yet to be discovered by you and many of your neighbors. The cultural treasures buried behind invitations you have never received.

As this book unfolds, it reveals how ordinary folks can make these invisible treasures visible and vibrant for people who live adjacent to one another and want to relate to one another. As example after example shows, once this social capital becomes visible, it can be invested in powerful ways to renew our health, security, care, local economy, ecology, and food sovereignty.

What makes for a thriving nation? That's an urgent question today, when the bodies politic of many nations around the world are clearly in ill-health. The great American poet Walt Whitman had an answer,<sup>1</sup>

penned around the start of the American Civil War, when the country's body politic seemed close to taking its last breath:

*STATES!*

*Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?*

*By an agreement on a paper? Or by arms?*

*Away!*

*I arrive, bringing these, beyond all the forces of courts and arms,*

*These! to hold you together as firmly as the earth itself is held together.*

By “These!” Whitman meant the relationships that are forged between neighbors. If we are to thrive as human beings, if democracy is to work as intended, it will depend on what Whitman called “countless linked hands” across our respective lands. This book shows us how to keep working for that democratic vision through connected communities.

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