

INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY BUILDING: IMAGINING POSITIVE POSSIBILITIES

by Kristin Bodiford



IN MY WORK AROUND CREATING more aging-friendly communities, Anne, a woman in her eighties, sent me an e-mail to remind us to create whole communities. I hold stories like Anne's central in my work.

I live in a gated senior community with all the amenities one could dream of — workshops, handicrafts, exercise, etc. — you name it, we have it. And yet I am longing, longing, to walk to the corner coffee shop, to hear the sound of children playing, dogs barking. I want to eat at the corner cafe, see young people in love, walk to the library, catch the train into the city, watch mothers with their children in the park, young families, teenies in the latest, wildest outfit. Yes, I'm lucky to have what I do and I never forget that. But, I am excluded from the mainstream of life.

Please consider in your conversations that there are many of us who do not want to be maintained. We want to belong, not only to each other, with whom we may have only one common denominator, age, but to society. We want to be "just like everyone else." Think about building communities that are whole. We need each other, we can learn to care about each other, support the young and the old, give what we have the energy to do, not what society has assigned to us. Instead of a multi-million-dollar resort where every need is met and everything is planned for the generic aging American, think up something daring, something challenging, something creative. (Anne Leitch, February 21, 2008)

To inspire our thinking, I thought I would share a couple of stories that I see as daring and creative examples of communities working to build whole communities with greater connection between generations.

In 1996, a group of citizens from Austin (a neighborhood in Chicago) participated in a program called Citizen Leaders that was part of the Imagine Chicago initiative.¹ Their initial project was an intergenerational softball league, so teenagers and older residents could get to know each other. The softball league inspired block clean-ups before the games and team barbecues after them. Ultimately, conversation among neighborhoods led to the creation of block clubs, community gardens, intergenerational sports programs, and a youth club. In addition, people began to come together to collectively address important issues in their neighborhoods.²

In Cleveland, young people gathered oral histories from the elders in their community. While the youth were listening to their elders, they were also doing things to help them around their homes. In one instance,



a group of youth painted their storyteller's front porch and planted flowers while he shared stories and photos from his life. As teens listened to older residents talk about how to make the community better, they began asking what they could do to help.³

These are the stories that inspire me.

In 2005, I had the opportunity to work in the community that I grew up in, where my parents still live, to better understand the challenges and opportunities residents face as they age. Over the last 50 years, the city of Lake Oswego, Oregon, grew as a community of young families fueled by the demographic wave of baby boomers. The city councilors realized that how the community responds to the changing needs of their community is critical to the success of the city. The city also recognized the tremendous strengths and contributions that citizens in this demographic group make to the community. A process was developed called the "Lake Oswego 50+ Community Dialogues" that mobilized and engaged the strengths of their community. The process was based on the belief that individuals have a strong stake in creating the future of their community and a desire to participate in shaping that future. Through active dialogue, community members created a vision of what a vibrant community would be for them as they age.

An important element in this vision was that residents wanted members of every generation to be able to remain connected to other genera-

tions living in Lake Oswego. They also wanted the focus and vision of creating community to be on creating a “community for all ages.” They created a vision statement for what they envisioned for their community:

Lake Oswego is a community that honors and values every stage of life and encourages interaction between all ages. This community will be one where the knowledge of all individuals is shared to form a harmonious and compassionate link to benefit the social, physical and mental health of each citizen.

Foundational to this vision were social interactions that create a sense of community. Importantly, they wanted these connections for all generations, to encourage interaction among all age groups and to avoid segregation that can isolate generations. Many residents communicated that they wanted more intentional connection across generations. In particular, they wanted more structured opportunities that were designed specifically to interact with youth. They wanted activities and programs to bring youth and adults together to develop relationships and help form a better understanding of each other. Residents advocated for planning and policy development that recognizes the needs of individuals along the entire life span.

So how do we build more intergenerational connection in our communities?

We can begin with programs and initiatives in our communities that bring generations together. A major initiative by Harvard School of Public Health and MetLife Foundation states:

Community-based initiatives that bridge the generations should receive special attention, by integrating the old with the young, transmitting knowledge and experience to future generations and re-enforcing the value of people of all ages.⁴

Intergenerational programming refers to activities or programs that increase cooperation, interaction, and exchange between people of different generations. Through intergenerational programs, people of different generations are also able to share their talents and resources to support each other in relationships that benefit both the individual and their community. These programs provide opportunities for individuals, families, and communities to enjoy and benefit from the richness of an age-integrated society. This takes planning from a lifespan or multigenerational

approach to an intergenerational approach. As Marge Schiller and Juanita Brown would say, “Multigenerational is the *who* and intergenerational is the *how*.”

As we work to bring generations together, what *questions* might we ask that help us to explore what a vibrant intergenerational community looks like?

*The seeds of change — that is, the things people think and talk about, the things people discover and learn, and the things that inform dialogue and inspire action — are implicit in the very first questions we ask. It may well be that our most important task is continuously to craft the unconditional positive question that allows the whole system to discover, amplify and multiply the alignment of strengths in such a way that weaknesses and deficiencies become increasingly irrelevant.*⁵

A question that drives my work is how we build community where we have opportunities to care about and for each other. Intergenerational community building embraces this relational orientation. When we encourage generations to come together, our mutual understanding is enhanced; our capacity to care for each other, expanded; and our shared effort of addressing community issues, empowered.

Imagine a community in which the wisdom of the different generations is harnessed to care for and grow the community. (David Peters, Co-Coordinator, Communities For All Ages in New Rochelle, NY)

Communities for All Ages (CFAA) offers an alternative, intergenerational lens to create communities that are good for people in which to grow



up and grow older, and it intentionally engages multiple generations to work on issues. They stress that intergenerational community building is most successful when it engages individuals from all stages of life and intentionally focuses on fostering meaningful relationships from the outset. We

often hear from multiple generations how much they learn about each other, when they are able to develop and strengthen their relationships.

I think older people are afraid of young people... but when you mix them up together... it's not as scary, is it? Young people are like everybody else... just have to get used to them... have to reach out to them, embrace them. (Older adult resident, Communities for All Ages)

I learned when adults understand the place youth come from, it can be really fun to work with them to make changes in our community. I learned that I can be on that level with adults and that they bring fun, wisdom, and knowledge when we learn from each other at a deeper level. I didn't understand this before. I never thought that would be possible. Now I know that anything is possible. (Youth, Antioch, CA)

As we engage in intergenerational dialogue, we have the opportunity to bring forward the best of what has been and what is, to spark our imagination for what could be, what is possible. It also allows for community values and history to be shared and passed on.⁶ I am left wondering, how can we do this when we live in age-segregated communities? When we live in intergenerational communities, we have more opportunities to rub shoulders and be in relationship with each other.

As we work to bring generations together, we might ask ourselves, *who else might be included?*

Nancy Henkin from Communities for All Ages reminds us to consider, “Who is not at the table? Whose voices are included? Whose voices are left out? Kids who have left school, older adults who don't speak English or who are physically frail? How can the building of relationships be part of what we do?” She proposed an intentional focus on relationship building and social capital as a critical foundation to intergenerational community building.

Social capital is generated through trustful, reciprocal relationships and through creating social connections as a means of facilitating collective agency.⁷

Intergenerational community building demonstrates possibilities for cultivating caring in our families, neighborhoods, schools, and communities. This type of high-empathy caring is at the heart of a relational responsiveness through which communities and societies develop strengthened social capital and resilience in the face of adversity. Through engaging

with each other in this relational way, we build our capacity to get along and work together to better meet the needs of all community members.

In this important move from fragmentation to interconnection, relational approaches offer resources to cultivate compassion for self and others, caring, empathy, and spontaneous action to help others. Kiwi Tamasese from Family Centre of New Zealand proposes that a sense of interconnection can result in a reciprocity or mutuality that the future is ours together, and with our rights we have a collective responsibility for each other and our world.

We intend it as an exploration, a call for greater awareness, conversation and broad debate about what we believe is our fundamental interdependence on one another and the crucial role of human relationships in the health of societies.⁸

Building intergenerational relationships and partnerships can also be a challenge and requires investing in preparing different generations and groups of people to work together. This essay explores how we might draw upon important relational resources with an attentiveness to building our collective capacity for dialogue, storytelling, listening deeply, and social action.

DIALOGUE

INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE CREATES OPPORTUNITIES to challenge thinking, develop relationships, revisit assumptions and beliefs, and consider new approaches to address important issues in our communities. Not only will this benefit youth and older adults, it will benefit the whole community, all generations. I will share a specific story about a group of youth from Antioch, California, in a project called Choppin' it Up that expanded their learning in transformative dialogue methods to their community.⁹



In one particular dialogue, the youth were exploring what they could contribute in their community if they were to weave their strengths together. Ideas ranged from creating activities downtown for all ages to come together and revitalize what was once the heart of the

PRINCIPLES OF TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE

- Examine the assumptions and judgments that we hold.
- Create a safe space by developing and committing to shared agreements.
- Speak from our personal experiences.
- Inquire into and be reflective of our reactions and responses.
- Be curious about and work to understand different viewpoints.
- Continue to expand the dialogue and engage more voices.
- Search for local meaning and relevance, and construct knowledge through social processes.
- Imagine the future and positive possibilities. Move towards and support social action. These new understandings and ways of seeing and knowing carry a number of possible actions or responses. In other words, knowledge and social action go together.

community, to addressing important issues in their community like gang violence and homelessness. They then envisioned a possible future if they were to put these ideas in place, and they imagined a community where young people are valued for these contributions and looked upon positively by other community members. They discussed things that would need to happen to help make their future vision a reality. One young man raised his hand and said, “2015 is too soon. We need help from others, adults in our community to achieve this vision. To do that, we need to change their perception of us.”

This started a new conversation from the one we had been having, focusing on how others might perceive them, how critical support from adults in the community was to achieving their vision, and what they could do to begin changing the way they might be viewed in their community. The youth decided to expand voices involved through hosting a community dialogue to support a collective imagining of the future. They also invited elders in the community to advise them in their efforts.

STORYTELLING

WHEN THE YOUTH MET WITH THE LOCAL ELDERS, the elders shared their experiences growing up in Antioch. The youth were energized to capture the memories of their elders. The young people were discovering the importance, as Phil Stafford writes, “to employ story to sustain that connec-

tion to our past. Old people, as the *rememberers*, represent a treasure we must protect. They re-member our communities.”



The elders also shared how people viewed them as “youths” in their communities and drew connections between what the youth shared about how they thought their community might view them. In some cases elders and youth connected on being seen as a “hoodlum,” “up to no good,” which they felt affected their participation in the community.

There are many ways that our stories about youth or about older adults increase the distance between generations. We can work to create new stories that reinforce our interconnectedness and build bridges to understanding. Narrative practices provide a road map for reauthoring problem-saturated dominant stories that lead to new stories and positive possibilities.

I am fed up with the media affecting me on a daily basis. I wear a black hoody and people see me as a hoodlum, a troublemaker. I enter the store and all eyes are on me. But I bet those people don't know that I average a 3.86 GPA in high school. And I also bet you that those people don't know that my intentions aren't to destroy the community, but to restore it. (Antioch Youth)

Narrative practice provides a way for us to identify events or stories that lift up positive aspects of our lives that include messages of purpose, values, hopes, and dreams. By sharing these stories with each other, between generations, our communities become more richly storied or narratively resourced, providing alternative options for meaning-making and social action.

Joe Lambert from the Center for Digital Storytelling shares that “story-work is a tool for healing, helping us reweave our connections to each other, strengthen communities, and heal societies through listening, making stories, and marking places with narrative.” In doing so, storytelling renews and changes everyone in the process. When we listen, deeply listen, to what others are saying, magic happens.¹⁰ It is transformative.

LISTENING

LISTENING PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE in both remembering and creating new stories. Listening carefully with great respect to someone as they tell their stories creates a space in which transformation can occur.¹¹ At times, people share their deepest experiences and sometimes great pain in these stories. Charles Waldengrave from the Family Centre in New Zealand talks about this as a great honor and sacred encounter. The elders in Antioch shared that being able to listen to another person's story and contribute to their well-being is an act of love. In this act of listening, memories are carried on, and people have a chance to be heard that builds a sense of belonging.

*Listening is an act of co-narrating — as listeners respond and interact with the narrator, they play a role in the shaping of the story.*¹²

As the youth listened to the wisdom of their community elders, they began together building a positive image for the future based upon the best of the past. The youth learned more about the lives of community elders, stories about the history of Antioch, and visions for how the elders would like to leave Antioch for future generations. Edward Sampson states, "...our lives must be a shared story, never entirely ours alone."¹³ How we create shared stories carries many possibilities.

Jerome Bruner uses a metaphor of map-making for how people might (re)construct stories of their lives as a journey. We might borrow from the metaphor for intergenerational community building through listening to others' stories to find our way and create a map of the journey.

*It is as if they were embarking on a journey without maps — and yet, they possess a stock of maps that might give hints, and besides, they know a lot about mapmaking. First impressions of the new terrain are, of course, based on older journeys already taken. In time, the new journey becomes a thing in itself, however much its initial shape was borrowed from the past.*¹⁴

The journey forward illuminates the possibility of contributing to a collective narrative about how we develop a sense of shared purpose that promotes resilience and creates positive change in communities.

SOCIAL ACTION

How we perform social action together offers powerful possibilities for transformation in our communities. Intergenerational community building stresses the importance and possibilities of all people working in partnership with each other and amplifying each others' strengths to ensure that young people, old people, and those in between receive the critical support and opportunities that promote healthy development throughout the lifespan.¹⁵

*Every single person has capabilities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capabilities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making.*¹⁶



A key element of intergenerational community building is the role of youth/adult partnerships. Developing youth and adult advocates that know how to think across a lifespan in community planning is key to ensuring that more voices are heard, in a way that respects and supports all of the generations. Intergenerational civic engagement, bringing generations together around social issues that impact communities, helps to broaden voices and bring more perspectives into social agendas and dialogue. This might look like an intergenerational council, in which youth and adults serve together to ensure that there is an intergenerational lens and priority in policy and programmatic decision-making. This approach also engages the strengths and builds the capacity of all generations to be active community contributors, where youth and older adults can serve as facilitators to bring people together in their communities, dissolve boundaries, and include more voices.

Strengthening youth–adult partnerships by participating in ongoing opportunities to engage in collaborative social action helps us to develop new ways of working together that are opening a way forward to radically different possibilities. These different possibilities are growing out of

strengthened relationships where youth and adults are seeing each other in new ways. A colleague, Michelle McQuaid, shared a quote from *My Stroke of Insight* where the author explains how, after she lost her ability to speak, she longed to communicate: “Whatever my age, whatever my credentials, reach for me. Respect me. I am in here. Come find me.”¹⁷ What if we were to think that each human being might be deep inside chanting, “Reach for me. Find me. I am here. Find my greatness.” This great power to be seen, heard, and to discover and care for each other is to be alive in our fullest, with connection at our core. Maybe the first step to creating good intergenerational relationships is to reach for each other with respect — to find each other.

IMAGINING POSITIVE POSSIBILITIES SOMETHING DARING, SOMETHING CHALLENGING

WHEN WE IMAGINE POSSIBILITIES, we create new stories and realities that lead to new understandings and relational practices. When addressing social injustices and adversity that people face in their lives, a new story of relational responsibility speaks to the importance of the process of relating itself.¹⁸ When we bring this attentiveness to issues of social justice, we find that it is imperative that we not only address the specific needs and engage and build upon the strengths of children, youth, families, and older adults within the communities in which they live, but that we also address the context of people’s lives. The notion of social injustice is greatly underestimated and underaddressed in our conversations about youth and older adults and the challenges they face in their lives. These injustices include poverty, lack of housing, unemployment, violence, abuse, and racism. We must work together to build more social, gender, economic, and cultural equity. Reflecting on the privileges and rights that come with being part of a dominant culture or group encourages relational responsibility to work for increasing equity between people in our worlds, with a significant focus on those most marginalized by dominant cultures.¹⁹

*A resilient community recognizes the interconnectedness of all its citizens and understands the well-being of children and youth is connected to the well-being of other age groups — and vice versa.*²⁰

Through developing and strengthening our connections among each other, we can address important social issues of marginalization, inequity, and injustice in this world through compassionate action. Through these

relationships, conditions of spontaneous compassion and action are created, like the left hand stopping the bleeding on the right, where people naturally care about each other and do what they can to help each other to thrive throughout the lifespan. Jerome Bruner wrote in his book, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*, that the left hand traditionally represents the powers of intuition, feeling, and spontaneity.²¹



When we work to deepen our understanding of each other, and have striking moments where our view has shifted and we see things anew, we almost cannot help but move towards social action.²² In this respect, community capacity building is about generative intergenerational relationships that demonstrate caring, respect, acceptance, and personal and social power. This thinking has inspired my learning journey

about how we can build this type of deeper understanding and connection with each other that results in compassionate actions in our relationships, neighborhoods, and communities. As we do this, we also move a way of thinking about “those people/those children” to a collective responsibility and to “our children/our people.”

My concluding proposal is this: When we consider what type of community we want to live in, we can also ask, what type of community do I want to contribute to and to build? How can we bring our vision, knowledge, and skills to create connected and caring communities that engage the strengths of all generations? Through our relationships with each other this vision begins to take shape. The resource is our conversations with each other. We can begin with conversation — one conversation at a time.

Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.”²³

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RESOURCES AND NOTES

Generations United works to improve the lives of children, youth and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs. www.gu.org.

Communities for All Ages is a national initiative that helps communities address critical issues from a multigenerational perspective and promote the well-being of all age groups. www.communitiesforallages.com

Creating Aging-Friendly Communities is an online resource to support people, organizations, and communities who are working to make their communities more aging-friendly. www.agingfriendly.org

¹ Imagine Chicago is a nonprofit organization that has been working since 1992 to cultivate hope and civic engagement in a variety of cross-cultural and intergenerational initiatives, projects, and programs. www.imaginechicago.org

² Imagine Chicago Ten Years of Imagination Report, <http://www.imaginechicago.org/docs/publications/Ten%20Years%20of%20Imagination.pdf>, p. 24.

³ Cleveland State University professor Dwayne Wright created the project, “Our Stories,” which produces oral histories from elders in exchange for painting and planting flowers. http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2008/06/oral_histories_paint_a_picture.html

⁴ Harvard School of Public Health — MetLife Foundation Initiative on Retirement & Civic Engagement. http://harvardschoolofpublichealth.net/chc/reinventingaging/report_highlights.html

⁵ Ludema, J. D., Cooperrider, D. L., and Barrett, F. J. "Appreciative inquiry: The power of the unconditional positive question." *Handbook of Action Research*, P. Reason and H. Bradbury (Eds.), pp. 189–199. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001.

⁶ McNamee, Sheila, and Kenneth J. Gergen. *Relational Responsibility: Resources for Sustainable Dialogue*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999, p. 64.

⁷ Deuchar, Ross. "Urban youth cultures and the re-building of social capital: Illustrations from a pilot study in Glasgow." *A Journal of Youth Work*, 1 (2009): 7–22. www.youthlinkscotland.org/webs/245/documents/JournalYouthWork.pdf

⁸ Szalavitz, Maia and Perry, Bruce. *Born for Love: Why Empathy Is Essential — and Endangered*. New York: William Morrow, 2010, p. x.

⁹ Choppin' it Up was developed in partnership with the Youth Intervention Network, the Antioch Unified School District, and Families Thrive of Contra County. To view videos produced by the youth, please go to www.choppinitup.org.

¹⁰ Lambert, Joe. *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. Berkeley: Digital Diner, 2002, pp. xvi, 86. Check out the Center for Digital Storytelling Storylab project "All Together Now" that is based on two generations' stories about lifting their voices in community at <http://www.storycenter.org/all-together-now/>.

¹¹ Waldegrave, Charles and Tamasese, Taimalieutu Kiwi. "Keynote Presentation." *Enriching Collaborative Practices across Cultural Borders Conference*. Merida, Yucatan. March 20, 2012.

¹² Bavelas, Janet B., Coates, Linda, and Johnson, Trudy. "Listeners as Co-narrators." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(6) (2000): 941–952.

¹³ Sampson, E. E. *Celebrating the Other: A Dialogic Account of Human Nature*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications, 2008, p. 139.

¹⁴ Bruner, Jerome S. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986, p. 36.

¹⁵ Benard, Bonnie. *Resiliency: What We Have Learned*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd, 2004, p. 105.

¹⁶ Kretzmann, John P. and McKnight, John. *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Evanston, IL: Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1993, p. 13.

¹⁷ Taylor, Jill Bolte. *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey*. New York: Viking, 2008.

¹⁸ McNamee and Gergen, *Relational Responsibility*.

¹⁹ Waldegrave, Charles and Tamasese, Taimalieutu Kiwi, "Keynote Presentation."

²⁰ Benard, p. 104.

²¹ Bruner, Jerome S. *On Knowing; Essays for the Left Hand*. Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1962.

²² Katz, Arlene, and Shatter, John. "Social poetics as a relational practice: Creating resourceful communities." Construction of Health and Illness, at Social Construction and Relational Practices Conference. Durham: n.p., 1999.

²³ Murray, W. H. *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*. Quote attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. London: Dent, 1951.