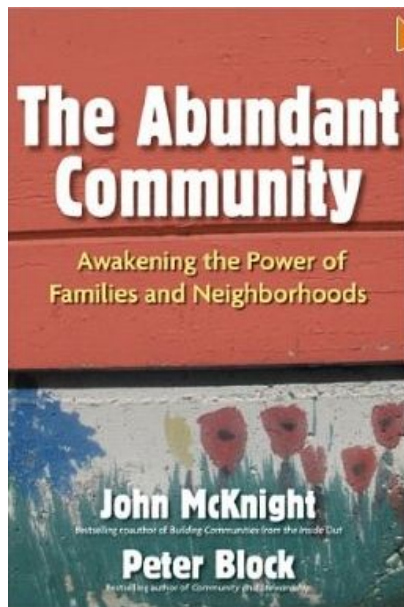




**BOOK REVIEW: THE ABUNDANT COMMUNITY,
AWAKENING THE POWER OF FAMILIES AND
NEIGHBORHOODS, BY JOHN MCKNIGHT AND PETER
BLOCK.**



If loving our neighbor is as related to loving our neighborhood as many in the church today believe it to be, then the 2010 book *'The Abundant Community'* is a very important study. While you won't find this book in the Christian section, you may find it very helpful in guiding your thinking and practice concerning the Great Commandment.

For many of us who are strangers to the world of sociology and the particular subsection of community development, it might be helpful to begin at the back of this book. Here we will be introduced to the authors John McKnight and Peter Block. This is an important starting place as the book is profoundly simple and may lead us to believe that the principles and practices therein are simplistic. A brief meeting with the authors will give us a glimpse of the depth of research and reflection behind this book. John McKnight is a transitional figure in the world of community development, shifting the approach in this field from 'needs assessment' to 'asset-based community development'. His manual entitled *'Building Communities From The Inside Out: a path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets'*^[2] is a benchmark for neighborhood transformation.

Peter Block has more than 40 years of experience in consulting, coaching and helping build sustainable organizations and communities. He has consulted in most of the major Cities in America and, as his biography at the back of the book states, this has lead him to an 'obsession' with 'building community' in neighbourhoods. His book *'Community, the Structure of Belonging'*^[3] makes this evident.

So now we come to the book which, as Walter Brueggemann remarks 'is a remarkable treatise concerning the crisis of our Western society and a response to it that summons us back to the neighborhood.' Yes Walter Brueggemann renown, Old Testament theologian and social commentator has not only reviewed the book *'The Abundant Community'* in glowing terms, but now is partnering with Block and McKnight in speaking engagements, and also in a forthcoming book.

The book begins with the words 'this book is an invitation into a new possibility for each of us to live a more satisfying life.' 'It is a possibility that is both visionary and realistic'. 'Our culture tells us that a satisfying life can only be purchased. It tells us that in the place where we live, we don't have the resources to create a good life. It tells us that we must find the expertise from marketers and professionals' (page xiii).

These lines essentially set up the first half of the book, which performs the function of articulating the conflict between what Jesus called Mammon, and God. The authors expose the ways in which the powers and principalities are crushing human flourishing in our western cultures.

Harkening back to McKnight's groundbreaking book, *'The Careless Society'*^[4], the authors explore the way in which the primary narrative in our consumer culture is that of 'service provision.' The impact of

this orientation on the day-to-day experience of people is to move us from being 'citizens' to 'clients.' Citizens are those who take responsibility for the people and places that are within their realm while clients are those who seek well being through the offerings of the ever-expanding service sector.

When neighbors become clients and give away the power of citizenship, our neighborhoods become incompetent. They are no longer able to provide what neighbourhoods must: friendship, nurture for our children, safety, food to sustain us, health, stewardship for our land, an enterprising economy, and care for the fragile.

The promise of satisfaction that the 'systems way' offers, through governments, businesses and institutions, will inevitably fail to provide human Flourishing.

The satisfied life, which could easily be called 'kingdom life', is found in being related well to neighbors and the neighborhood. The authors spell out the tenets of such relatedness: that satisfaction can be found among us, that it is through our cooperation that all of our needs are met, that we are responsible for each other, and that we live with the reality of the human condition.

Building this kind of satisfied life in a neighborhood involves more than 'holding picnics or doing a group service project together.'^[5] It involves discovering each other's gifts, nurturing associational life and offering hospitality to the margins. These practices in turn, create an environment of kindness, generosity, cooperation, forgiveness and acceptance of fallibility and mystery (page 68).

Discovering gifts, forming associations, and extending hospitality are the practices that need to be operationalized in order to create a competent community. Every human being has gifts that must be discovered and celebrated. We must come together as gifted people with common interests. We must discover everyone, valuing their contribution. The neighbourhood is our place and it is in these practices that the local place called neighborhood has unique and irreplaceable value

'*The Abundant Community*' concludes with a brief chapter outlining the vital role of 'Community Connectors.' These are the people within our neighborhoods who see the value in individuals and have a vision for their neighborhood. They are trusted. They find joy connecting, convening and inviting people to come together. 'They are not seeking to lead people. They know the power of joining people. They are hospitable.'

Here at the end of the book Block, and McKnight, push for a renewed recognition and mobilization of Community Connectors as a vital element in creating an abundant community. They offer the subtle suggestion that everyone can be a Community Connector. Then with gentle persuasion, they ask us as connectors to go to our neighbors and begin to ask these questions which have a rich history in asset-based community development:

What are the gifts of your head? What do you know about?

What are the gifts of your hands? What do you know how to do?

What are the gifts of your heart? What do you especially care about?

What clubs, groups and associations do you and your family belong to or participate in?

[1] John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community, Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012).

[2] John P. Kretzmann and John McKnight, *Building Communities From The Inside Out: a path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*, (Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1993).

[3] Peter Block, *Community the Structure of Belonging*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).

[4] John McKnight, *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits*, (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

[5] Personal conversation with the authors.



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