

## Real communities

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The former prime minister once dreamed of Australia as a nation of shareholders enriched by their their participation in the adventure of capitalism.

Properly conceived, that is certainly one form of social engagement. If it looks a little less appealing to the punters today than it did back then, that might be because the full value of that kind of participation has not been widely or well enough understood.

Investing in our economic future is a worthwhile thing to do, and is most rewarding in the long term if, like philanthropy, it is undertaken as a form of social engagement. That's how the finest capitalists, from Adam Smith onwards, have approached it. Such investment is a symbol of the investor's faith in the future and in the integrity and potency of the enterprises they choose to support via their shareholding. Committed investment helps build communities and hold them together.

If, by contrast, the stock market is conceived of as a vast casino where buyers and sellers behave as if they are nothing more than gamblers, the system is bound to break down because the motivations are warped. Exploitation, motivated by greed, is a very different thing from investment. It is also a very different thing from social engagement.

Investment is the key to the creation of stronger communities and, ultimately, to a stronger nation. But this is not only about dollars.

We could dream a much larger dream about investment since, one way or another, we all make a social and emotional investment in the kind of society we are becoming. We could, for instance, choose to dream of a society where each of us understands that we are all part of one vast, vibrating web of interconnectedness. We could invest in the idea that all our actions – the way we save and spend our money, the way we occupy our time, the way we respond to the needs of strangers, all the ways we live – have consequences for the health and well-being of the whole.

At its utopian best, this would be a dream about a nation – or even a neighbourhood – where our natural individualism is submerged beneath a concern for the common good; where, as a guiding story, competition gives way to a more egalitarian spirit of co-operation; where the shared values of citizens are shaped by a powerful sense of belonging to each other.

Belonging? Community? Shared values? These, surely, have become the weasel words of contemporary social analysis. Overblown and overplayed, they have been robbed of much of their meaning. They have come to sound more like mantras than social goals. Indeed, the word 'village' is de rigueur if you're writing a real estate advertisement or creating a promotional brochure for a new high-rise development: the vertical village is with us.

It's even become fashionable to speak of 'the Australian community', as if Australians were a close-knit little group, sharing in the life of some village where everyone knows everyone, everyone trusts everyone, and from which we draw a powerful and sustaining sense of identity and emotional security.

Yet we cling hopefully, and sometimes desperately, to words like community and village, precisely because we know, deep in our guts, that any successful, civilised society would aspire to that utopian prospect.

Perhaps we also sense that the fondly imagined community is under threat, and we suspect the consequences of that might be serious. In fact, the consequences could hardly be more serious: our moral sense is, after all, a social sense.

It is only by learning how to live in a community that we gradually acquire our sense of right and wrong, as well as more subtle values like tolerance, compassion and respect for others.

The fact that we don't even know our neighbours' names may have become a cliché of urban life and a favourite piece of anecdotal evidence for those who worry about the state of modern society. If you're concerned about the stability and cohesiveness of communities, there are more compelling pieces of evidence than that.

Take the upheavals in our patterns of marriage and divorce. A mere thirty years ago, the institution of marriage was still regarded by most Australians as a symbol of our stable society: 90 per cent of Australians were married by the age of thirty, and only about 8 or 9 per cent of marriages ever ended in divorce. Today, fewer than half of us are married by the age of thirty and over a third of contemporary marriages are expected to end in divorce.

While there's a strong argument in favour of easy divorce, and much to be said in praise of higher standards for marriage, a high-divorce society does have to contend with the fact that many friendship circles, neighbourhoods and communities are destabilised by marriage breakdown and family dislocation. Almost a quarter of families with dependent children are one-parent families and many of those solo parents are too busy, too stressed and too tired to participate in the life of any community.

About one million dependant children are currently living with only one of their natural parents, and about half of them regularly migrate from the home of the custodial parent to the home of the other parent for an access visit. This mass migration of children is a challenge to communities: not only is there inevitable disruption on a large scale, but there are additional needs for the care of children – and parents – distressed by all these comings and goings. The new Children's Contact Centres, designed to ease this pain, are a positive sign of our community's capacity to address the changing social order.

In the suburbs of the past, children typically acted as a social lubricant. But in spite of the present, probably temporary, lift in the birth-rate, we have reached the point where, relative to total population, we are currently producing the smallest generation of children Australia has ever seen. That social lubricant is in short supply, especially in the middle and upper-middle socioeconomic strata.

Not only is their birth-rate falling faster than in lower socio-economic strata (where, among other factors, the \$5,000 baby bonus is a major incentive), but parents are also becoming more protective of their children, less inclined to allow them to go outside and play and more likely to confine them to private cars on the way to and from school. A sharp decline in the number of stay-at-home mothers has further altered the dynamics of neighbourhood life, producing a generation of over-worked women and converting most of our suburbs into true dormitories with little daytime social interaction. Increasingly, we need to make an appointment to chat with our neighbours.

The mobility of the population also disrupts neighbourhoods: on average, Australians move house once every five or six years. That helps to explain why, according to research published by Edith Cowan University, only a third of us say we trust our neighbours.

Even the burgeoning numbers of wealthy Australians – and the widening gap between them and the rest – erode our sense of ourselves as members of a relatively homogeneous, middle-class society. It is now beginning to look as if our egalitarian dream might be evaporating, as a spirit of entitlement takes root among more affluent Australians.

Information technology plays its part, too, by blurring the traditional distinction between data transfer and communication, by tempting us to spend more time with machines than with each other, and by seducing us with the idea that online connections are just like the other kind. Indeed, for the rising generation of young Australians, words like 'community', 'connected' and even 'identity' have acquired new meanings in cyberspace.

Older people might think the idea of the global village was a hoax perpetrated by vested interests, but the young know better. If you doubt it, take a look at MySpace or Facebook, or any of the online networks and mobile phone links that facilitate constant contact between the members of the new cyber-tribes. They don't just feel as if these are real communities; they also have a range of online identities to go with them. The Symantec Identity Survey,

conducted by Woolcott Research in 2007, found that heavy users of the internet typically had more than ten 'virtual identities' and that well over a third of users of internet social networks, virtual worlds or gaming sites believe their online identities are closer to their 'true self' than their physical or 'real-world' identities.

Back in that real world, our shrinking households are an intriguing sign of how radically and rapidly Australian communities are changing in ways that threaten social inclusion. (The fact that we are building ever larger houses to accommodate ever smaller households is also intriguing, but that's another story.) More than a quarter of Australian households now contain just one person and the ABS estimates that proportion will have risen to over one-third by the year 2026. One-person and two-person households already account for more than half of all households.

This is a complex picture, of course: we shouldn't automatically assume that aloneness equals loneliness. Many people cheerfully choose to live alone – often for brief episodes – but, at least in the short term, it looks as if the shrinking household heightens the risk of social exclusion and disengagement.

Longer term, I'm inclined to regard the shrinking household as an encouraging signpost to a more connected and more engaged community. We are, after all, herd animals and when the domestic herd shrinks below the normal herd size of seven or eight, we need to look elsewhere for herds to connect with. We may begin by grazing with the herd (it's no accident that the café revolution has coincided precisely with the upheaval in household composition), and then move on to a book club, a choir, a clean-up roster.

When we fear that the social fabric is fraying, it's tempting to assume the best solution is to impose a kind of regulated morality on society by creating more rules to compensate for the lack of social engagement. Calls for everything from anti-vilification laws to more regulation of corporate boards, tougher sentencing of criminals, tighter censorship of the media, all the way down to dog-walking laws ... these are signs of our vulnerability to the idea that if we can't trust each other to act with restraint, compassion and moral sensitivity, we must legislate to create the kind of society we want.

As a response to social insecurity and anxiety, this is understandable – but unwise. Ever tougher rules and regulations won't make us a fairer, more compassionate society. In fact, it is more likely to do the opposite since excessive regulation tends to stifle, rather than quicken, the conscience. If we continue down the path of increasing regulation, we may well order our society in ways currently thought to be desirable, but at what cost?

The real challenge for anyone interested in rebuilding the sense of community is not to regulate more, nor to preach about ethics in the hope that people will start to act more considerately or compassionately in obedience to some written or unwritten charter of social responsibility. If we believe in the benefits that flow from being part of the life of a functioning community, the challenge is simply to find more ways of bringing people back together again.

For a start, we need to create more urban and suburban spaces conducive to the kind of spontaneous social interaction that facilitates friendly neighbourhoods – places where people can eat together, walk together, sit and talk together, or play together.

We need less emphasis on private space and more on public space, bearing in mind that two-income households have less time to maintain a traditional house and garden. We need to explore the concept of co-housing, where small living units are clustered around communal dining and recreation areas. We need to place more emphasis on shared transport, and less on the isolating cocoon of the private car. A great example is the 'walking bus' concept for kids, organising them into supervised groups for the walk to school.

We need to accelerate the trend towards establishing commercial centres on the perimeters of our large cities, so more of us can work where we live and, in turn, have more time and energy to become engaged with our local communities. We need to encourage greater participation in community activities – everything from clean-up campaigns and bush-care

groups to team sports, drama classes and poetry clubs – which reassure people that ‘the village’ exists and that they can belong to it.

In fact, the more you look at the ills of contemporary society – alienation, fragmentation, isolation, depression – the more compelling the need for communal participation in the arts seems. Surely, encouraging co-operative, collaborative creativity must be one of the better ways to foster a sense of community, promote mental health and well-being, and reduce the pressures of a competitive, materialistic society. Learning to paint or write (in a class that creates its own sense of belonging), putting on plays and musicals, organising festivals, making movies, taking up photography, puppetry or tapestry, singing in choirs, dancing, playing in bands ... these are all effective pathways to mental health for people whose daily lives are mostly spent in non-creative pursuits.

I recall my own experience of singing in a choir and resisting, every week, the demand to attend rehearsals: ‘I’m too busy for this – I’ll have to skip it this week’ ... until the conductor’s baton was raised, we began to sing and the therapeutic effects kicked in as reliably as any drug.

We talk endlessly about the need for ‘balance’, by which we usually mean the balance between work, family and leisure. But there’s another quite magical possibility: balancing the stresses, disappointments and tedium of life with the therapeutic release of tension through some form of regular creative outlet that restores your sense of perspective and your sense of worth, while connecting you to others.

Many people recall with intense pleasure their participation in school plays, orchestras, choirs and art classes. It wasn’t just the music or the art or the performance: it was often the strong sense of group cohesion – of being a team player – that lingered most vividly in the memory. Sometimes they look back wistfully and wonder where all that pleasure (and all that talent) went. Why did it stop when they left school? And why couldn’t it be recaptured?

Perhaps it’s time to dust off all those Schools of Arts across the country and put them to the use for which they were originally intended.

Most of us find the richest source of life’s meaning in our personal relationships. Being herd animals, we are born to communicate, to join, to gather, to connect and to share. When we deny those natural impulses, we diminish both ourselves and the communities to which we properly belong. The online revolution notwithstanding, I believe the most significant communities – significant, that is, in building a civilised, participative society – are still our local neighbourhoods. Grand visions of society have their place, but it’s in the neighbourhood that we join the dots, a fact brought home to us with stark clarity whenever a crisis, like a flood or a bushfire, draws us together.

Getting along with friends and other like-minded people is easy: belonging to school or church communities, or even to gardening clubs or art classes, can be deeply satisfying and should be encouraged. But if we’re not careful, such micro-communities can become tribal enclaves that add to the problem of social divisiveness. The real test of the civilising power (indeed, the moral power) of community is how we get along with people we haven’t chosen to be with, don’t especially like, and who don’t necessarily share our interests.

Those unplanned, accidental encounters still happen in streets all over Australia, where people manage to get along with neighbours they never chose to live beside. But the pressures of our society are working against the miracle happening. We are tending to confine our contacts to the tried and trusted, at the cost of connections with our neighbours. That’s unhealthy. There’s no point in complaining about the loss of a sense of community if you haven’t knocked on your neighbour’s door and introduced yourself.

If you’re serious about wanting to restore the health of your neighbourhood, join a choir or a book club, by all means. But don’t forget to invite the neighbours in for a drink, as well. Find a few neighbours prepared to take it in turns to mow the lawn of the elderly person on the corner, or do the shopping for a harassed carer or single mother. Leave the car in the garage and walk around the block occasionally, greeting the people you meet.

That's participation; that's engagement; that's investment. □

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