

Preface

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IN THIS BOOK I invite you to invest yourself in deepening community—to discover or rediscover the joy of being together.

I don't use the word *invest* lightly. Like any investment, community takes time and effort. We spend years investing for our retirement, setting aside dollars in order to live a good life in our old age. Our financial advisors tell us to start this process early, when we are young, in order to have enough when we're old (though they're always quick to add that it's never too late to start). Investing in relationships to deepen community reaps a similar benefit. A strong family, a faith community or club, neighbors we can rely on, and friends who make the hours pass quickly—these are equally worthy investments. The skills we learn by seeking and living in community, and the network of relationships we build, will provide us with the joy and security we need, especially should we experience times of loneliness, financial insecurity, or failing health.

I don't use the word *deepening* lightly, either. As I will explore with you in the pages that follow, I believe that we can deepen our experience of community as the alternative to falling into, or even embracing, dysfunctional forms of community: shallow community, based on selfish or even just lazy or bewildered individualism; and fear-based community, in which people derive their sense of belonging from anxiety or hatred.

I recognize that my call to deepen community makes my book a serious and even challenging one, but I believe that it also makes it a deeply joyful one. Why? Because of what I've seen in my work as a community activist, writer, and teacher: many of us, in response to environmental and economic worries, are going local and are rediscovering ourselves and one another. And rather than acting out of fear, we are finding purpose, belonging, security, and fulfillment, through the following:

- Enjoying one another
- Taking care of one another
- Working together to make our families, neighborhoods, communities, and the world great places to live in for all

We live in community. It's in our DNA. We need one another, plain and simple. Community shapes our identity and quenches our thirst for belonging. It helps us put life into perspective and sort out real danger from perceived danger. Community has the capacity to improve our physical, mental, and economic health, as well as our overall sense of happiness and fulfillment. It has the power to unite us all in a common bond as we work together for a better world.

I have written *Deepening Community* to empower all of us to open up to community, to make conscious choices about the kind of community we desire, and to feel more connected to the people we care about. Accordingly, I hope that this book will prove to be informative and stimulating to several types of readers:

- Individuals who want to deepen community in their lives and to contribute their talents and energy toward a common goal
- Parents who want to create a strong, life-sustaining community environment for their children

- Community-development professionals, faith leaders, and all those who want to better understand the value of community and neighbors, and their importance in building belonging and inclusion into the services they offer or the social-change strategies they effect
- Organizations and policy makers in search of a framework to enhance a sense of community and place for people
- Elected officials and bureaucrats who need to take notice and learn about citizen engagement and trust building as they keep the promises they've made

Throughout the pages that follow, I weave together three types of community stories. The first type comprises stories of the community I grew up in and the lessons it taught me. My people—a Mennonite community previously living in Ukraine—had suffered through one of the worst periods of history, when the entire world was at war. They survived because they stayed together. Although fear influenced their community, they thrived because they replaced their fear with love. The second concerns my experiences in the community-building work to which I've dedicated my life: thirty years, so far, of joining with others to bring people together to end poverty, work collaboratively, and harness the power of community. And the third type involves stories of many fellow seekers of deeper community whom I've met along the way.

The wonderful news is that the opportunity to deepen community is right in front of us—and so are the people who want to work with us to make it happen.