Contents

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Foreword

THE IDEA OF COMMUNITY is all around us and increasingly on our lips. It sells real estate, markets social technology, and appears in the mission statements of most institutions. There are community recreation centers, community health movements, communities of practice, and community organizers. Unfortunately, the idea of community is more on our lips than in our experience. The speaking about community is always genuine, but it so goes against the individualism and fear embedded in our modern culture that it represents longing more than reality. It is more an adjective than a statement of central purpose.

The idea of community also suffers from its ambiguity. The word has a wide range of meanings. It can be a town, a network of interests, a neighborhood, a group of friends, or a set of employees. When a word covers everything, it loses its utility.

Paul Born, as much as anyone I know, has brought clarity and solid practical usefulness to this thing called community. He decided thirty years ago that if we care about poverty, safety, or well-being, then the experience of community is essential. It is the point. Not a luxury, or a pleasantry, or a memory of a time past. His work holds the intention that community needs to be at

the center of our thinking, no matter what results we are trying to achieve in the world.

That is why this book, *Deepening Community*, is important. It should be required reading for all those, as Paul puts it, "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." In a personal and accessible way that is in total harmony with the book's message, Paul explains how to make community the heart of these efforts.

Making community the point is a major undertaking. It means we need to make the common good a priority again. It calls for cooperation and collaboration. It asks that we place the well-being of all of us higher than the well-being of any single one of us. If we take community seriously, then we agree to give up some control and to listen more than speak. Community blurs the line of where your property ends and mine begins. These are radical practices when taken seriously.

Western culture stands on a long history of affirming the rights of the individual. Capitalism worships the idea of competition and winning, so much so that we have raised the status of competition to be a defining part of our nature. We place a bell curve ranking the best to the worst over the heads of our children the moment they enter school.

In addition to revering competition and individualism, we hold a nearly religious belief in the healing effects of technology. As Paul declares, we believe the myth that "all we need is more time, money, and technology to solve the problems of peace, poverty, and health." Perhaps now is the time to put this myth to rest. This book invites us to do just that. It is an important invitation, and here is why:

- Time in the modern world has become the enemy of relatedness. Speed has become a rationalization for doing what we do not believe in. Time has become an argument against collaboration. Cooperation and democracy are discounted as inefficient. We live on the pretense of being busy.

- Money is also an argument against community. Learning together in the same room is costly. Meeting together is costly. The virtual world is justified by its low cost. We say, let's create the future online. We can learn online. We can meet online. This ignores the social and relational dimension of learning, the relational dimension of achievement. Learning and achievement have been reduced to a transfer of knowledge and automated ways of managing the world. When our occasions for human connection become commodified into what is cost-effective, so much for community. So much for relationships.

- Technology has become a religion, Steve Jobs a saint, and speed, convenience, global access, and home shopping a liturgy. The dominant argument against community, against the intimacy and connectedness that Paul speaks to, is that what was local, and intimate, and had space for silence, has now been automated. We have swallowed 24/7 as a condition of nature. We must respond, *this moment.* Wherever we meet, we bring our phones that we have labeled "smart." The technology manages us because it is there. In larger questions of the land, of the environment, of the workplace, technology promises nirvana. It replaces the schoolhouse and the local business. It promises connection, but in reality reinforces our isolation. We spend a lot of time alone, watching a screen.

Against this onslaught, *Deepening Community* radically declares that we *do* have the time, the money, and all the tools necessary to solve any challenge, by coming together in community. The book gives us the definitions we need. It makes important distinctions so that each of us can find our way into community, be it through inner work, family, neighborhood, or the workplace.

The book is also timely, for much is already occurring in the world that proves the value of community. There is a cohousing movement, where people choose to share the tasks of raising children, cooking, caring for the vulnerable, and keeping safe. There are pocket neighborhoods, such as those being designed by architect Ross Chapin: modest dwellings that all face a commons and become the village that raises a child.

There is a resurgence in cooperative businesses, where the well-being of the employees is their first priority and profit takes its rightful place as a means instead of an end. Every city has community gardens and community-supported agriculture networks (CSAs), where food is locally grown and abandoned land is reclaimed.

There is cooperative learning and cooperative education. A heart surgeon named Paul Uhlig has invented Collaborative Rounds, where the physician, nurses, and other supporting functions meet in a circle with the patient and family to jointly discuss treatment. When they do this, all measures of care improve. Edgar Cahn has developed TimeBanking, where generosity and neighborliness are tracked and exchanged. *Yes!* magazine does a beautiful job of telling the story of these movements toward community.

All these cooperative and communal ventures form a social movement of enormous importance, one that offers an alternative to the dominant belief in competition, materialism, and individualism. *Deepening Community* is an important contribution

to this movement. The book is an anthem bearing witness to our humanity and our capacity to be together in peace. It takes a big step in making community building a legitimate discipline that belongs at the center of our thinking.

Peter Block
Cincinnati, Ohio

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Preface

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.

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1 Our Need Today for Deeper Community

In every community, there is work to be done.
In every nation, there are wounds to heal.
In every heart, there is the power to do it.

—MARIANNE WILLIAMSON, FOUNDER OF THE PEACE ALLIANCE AND AUTHOR

MANY TIMES OVER the past thirty years, especially in connection with the work I've done with others more recently to engage communities in reducing poverty, I've been asked, "What is the most important thing people can do to make a difference in the world?"

"That's simple," I almost always reply. "Bring chicken soup to your neighbor."

"Really?" is the typical response.

I say yes, and then add, "But remember, I said the answer is simple. But the act of bringing soup . . . well, that takes work."

How so?

It requires that you know your neighbor.

It requires that you know they are not vegetarian and like soup.

It requires that you know them well enough and communicate regularly enough to know they are sick.

Once you know they are sick, you must feel compelled to want to help and to make this a priority among the many calls on your time and energy.

Your neighbor must know you well enough to feel comfortable in receiving your help.

And you must have enough of a relationship to know what they prefer when they are sick, whether it is chicken soup, *pho*, *chana masala*, or even ice cream.

So, you see, the work takes place long before you perform the act of bringing soup.

I think you would agree that the challenge, for so many of us today, is to find the time and energy and desire to do the work of being a good neighbor—even to stay close to members of our own family, for that matter. Many of us find ourselves stretched to keep in touch with one another, to share in one another's lives, to strengthen community together. I believe that a combination of the state of the environment and the economy, the stress of our jobs (or of finding a job), and the sped-up nature of life through new technologies is making it difficult for us to invest ourselves in community.

Do you ever feel this way?

Many people I know—including the five hundred people I surveyed in depth as I wrote this book (see the appendix) and the many I reach out to through my work and travels—have told me they want community to be less sporadic and more constant. They recognize that we are in danger of losing a sense of community in our lives. Even though we connect with people often, life today seems more complex than ever. Connecting, therefore, is sporadic and takes a lot of effort. For so many of us, our brothers and sisters and most of our cousins live a long way away, and even

those who live nearby are so busy that we manage to connect with them only every month or two. With the exception of a few, the same goes for friends. To visit them means traveling long distances, which often is impractical.

Connecting with people sporadically doesn't feel right to us. More fulfilling would be the ability to show our caring when a friend is sick by going to their place and comforting them, knowing they would do the same for us. Somewhere within us we are aware that we need to deepen our experience of community. We know we should be sharing with family members, friends, and neighbors not just episodes of our lives but whole chapters and books and even libraries: we want to be part of the ongoing story of their lives, and we want them to be part of ours.

Now, it's not as if we never do these things. However, so many people have told me they would like community life to take less effort; they would like it to be a regular part of their daily life; they would like the connections they make to be natural extensions of their comings and goings, not relegated to deliberate actions that require extraordinary effort.

You would think that our neighborhoods would be natural places for building a deeper sense of community. This would be in stark contrast to the experience of being a neighbor today. Unless we are deliberate about meeting, we "hide" behind our apartment door dozens of floors up from a busy cityscape or behind a garage door that closes with a click of a button as we retreat to our suburuban oasis from the stresses of life. Many neighbors are so busy that they seldom even see one another coming and going. On weekends they're lucky to lay eyes on one another, as so many exit their weekday existence by cocooning or taking a quick trip away or heading for the cottage. Besides, we

watch far too much TV and are involved in too many activities for our paths to cross.

Does any of the above describe your experience, at least to some degree? Are you like so many people I hear from who say they attend a community fundraiser or a neighborhood party and feel a sense of connection that evaporates as quickly as the event ends? They get involved by joining a church or a yoga class, but unless they attend weekly, they experience little connection outside the deliberate act of attending. Even when they join a committee or a midweek support group, the sense of community is confined to the place and time scheduled for the gathering. They may have a wonderful visit with a group of friends whom they have known for more than a decade but leave knowing it will be months (or years) before they do this again.

I do not want to express dissatisfaction with any of these moments in life. But that is exactly what they are: moments. We need not commit to anything more than the moment, and neither does anyone else. We have community, and then . . . well, it is gone, and we go on to the next experience of community. It is as though we have built deliberate barriers of time and place into our community interactions so that we can control how much community we experience and when we experience it. On the surface, this may sound ideal, but as much as we may enjoy this anonymity once in a while, it does not feel very satisfying in the long run.

The Possibilities of Community

I hope that you will join me in exploring the possibility of deeper community today. This book is my call to you—to us—to work

together to deepen community: to make a conscious, proactive, intentional effort to hold on to and build on the connections between us, connections that will help us resist the pull of the often-neurotic social responses to the complexity of our times, what I will speak of in the next chapter as shallow community and fear-based community.

Community is not automatic, and it is not automatically optimal. We cannot take it for granted; we cannot assume that it is what it should be; we cannot stand on the sidelines and just hope that things will work out.

When we invest ourselves to deepen our experience of community, we can realize real benefits. Community can help shape our identity as a collective and interdependent people. It creates the opportunity for us to care for and about others and, in turn, to be cared for, the key interaction that builds a sense of belonging. When we belong and enjoy strong relationships with one another, we can rely on one another in both good and difficult times. This makes us more resilient, and it makes us healthier. It improves our economic opportunities (think about networking to find a job) and, as studies show, even makes us happier.

The Possibilities of Community for Our Children

My wife, Marlene, and I often wonder about the possibilities of community for our sons and what their memories of community will be when they are older. How will they know who they are and where they belong?

We spoke about this shortly after the birth of our first son, Lucas. For us, community was a defining understanding of how we wanted to raise our children; it was even reflected in the wording

of our marriage vows. We committed ourselves to providing our children (Michael would follow, five years later) with as many "deep" experiences of community as we could. We went to church because it was a community. We attended reunions of our extended families, organized neighborhood barbecues, and helped out at a variety of schools and with a myriad of sports teams, because each of these represented community in our sons' lives.

We also spoke to them about community and its importance. For example, we shared a particular bedtime story with them many a night. I saw it as a nighttime prayer. As told to our son Michael, it went like this:

> Once upon a time there was a little boy, and his name was Michael, and everybody loved him: his mom, and his dad, and his brother [Michael interrupted me one night, piping up with, "That's not true, Dad; Lucas just likes me—he told me so"], his *oma* and *opa* [German for "grandma" and "grandpa"] and his *lola* [Filipino for "grandmother," which we called Marlene's mother after her sisters' families returned from four years of volunteer mission work in the Philippines], and all his cousins [a satisfied grin always covered Michael's face at this point; he really loved his cousins], and all the children at school, and everyone at his church [Michael always interjected "Not everybody," to which I would say, "Just about everybody," and he would say, "Yaaaa"], and all his neighbors [at which point Michael would beam and say, "Especially Dave and Marilyn; they have a pool"].

And I would smile and give him a big hug and say, "Love ya," and Michael would say back, "Love ya, too. Goodnight."

Bridging the Self-to-Community Gap

Marlene and I want our children to have not only a positive self-identity but also a positive community identity. However, the complexity of our times makes living in community perhaps the biggest challenge we face.

I believe that Charles Dickens would not find it difficult to extend his description of the eighteenth century, in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, to our century, for we, too, live in the best of times and the worst of times.

For an example of the best of our times, consider how so many countries have come to understand the importance of the rights of every individual. We have embraced feminism and dismantled racism—or at least have built a broad social consensus against racist language and attitudes. We have welcomed gays and lesbians into greater participation in social institutions. We have spoken out against torture in war and violence toward children. There is a growing understanding today, from our youth on up, that we must care for those in need and fight the downward pull of hatred based on ethnicity and ideology. There is a growing consensus that we must work for a just society and the protection of the rights of the individual.

Is it possible, though, that the pendulum has swung too far? In making it a priority to enhance individual rights and opportunities, have we made it easier for people to ignore community responsibilities? Tracking along with the positive gains we have made with regard to individualism are examples of the worst of our times: when families struggle to find appropriate day care or schools, as if children were an individual responsibility, or when we walk past or even over the homeless, believing that they must have done something to deserve their plight. If someone were

to win a million dollars, the world might say, "Good for you. Go ahead and spend it; you deserve it—it's yours." But our culture's individualistic approach does not bring deep satisfaction. Compare this with cultures in which people share windfalls with one another through potlatches or at large community weddings. Do we live in a time when an excessive focus on self is dismantling our need or sense of responsibility for one another?

We are tempted, when so much that comes at us is a mixture of the good and the bad, to throw up our hands in bewilderment and do nothing. But many individuals and groups are fighting against the worst-of-times aspects of life today. I see people of every socioeconomic bracket and faith and employment level struggling to make sense of the changes they're facing, desperately seeking a future for their children that is better than the one they see coming. They—we—are seeking new answers and, in turn, are finding deeper connections. For example, in an age of globalization, many of us are "going local." We're rediscovering local foods and gardening, the simple pleasures of walking and cycling, and our neighbors. Each connection we make in these contexts deepens our resolve. We're using the Internet to offer people who want to visit our cities a free or inexpensive week's stay in our homes. We're sharing services. Consider the "casual carpools" in the San Francisco Bay Area, whereby pedestrians line up in certain locations and, on the basis of trust, take the next car in line, driven by a stranger—no, by a fellow citizen.

Community has the power to change everything. We all know this. Whether in places where we work together; neighborhoods where we share emotional, physical, and cultural resources; or countries where we strive to live at peace, we must mobilize people to work together toward a common vision if we are going to deepen community for all.

The challenge, however, is not so much to find ways as groups to reach out to others as it is to bridge the gap from the self to the group in the first place. The challenge is to understand, and get past, our own sense of isolation. We embrace our culture's veneration of rugged individualism, acting in ways that Eastern cultures would see as selfish. How do we begin to turn this around? How do we make the connection from the self to others? How do we build a bridge between ourselves and others? How do we cross it?

My Experience of Community

I have learned a lot about community in my work at the Tamarack Institute, where we have helped many rediscover the power of community. This has resulted in a reduction of poverty for nearly 250,000 people. We are confident, as people in cities are reaching out, seeking deeper connection, and relearning the skills of community engagement and collaboration, that we will reach our goal of reducing poverty for one million families.

We have seen that people can learn and make choices to work together and to care together. That no matter how difficult the task, through community engagement and collaboration we can create a positive vision, organize ourselves to achieve it, and realize a better future for all. Our key learning? That even though it takes a lot of commitment and skill to change our cities, no amount of talent or hard work matters if people do not share a sense of community. The deeper the community, the easier and better the outcome.

I also learned a lot as I grew up in a small, mostly Mennonite farming community. We were not a cloistered group like the Old Order Mennonites or Amish but were similar in many of our beliefs. We (our parents) were refugees from Ukraine in the Soviet

Union who had come to Canada after World War II. Because of the deprivation and violence that we had experienced, we kept close to one another. Eben Ezer Mennonite, our church of about four hundred people, was both the social and spiritual center of our lives. We were a community that was trying to heal and establish itself in a newfound country. I grew up feeling a tremendous sense of warmth, identity, and belonging, which was the foundation of my later understanding of community.

In my late teens, I studied to be a minister. Even though I quickly realized that this was not for me (I often joke that I like sin too much), I learned a lot during that time about the ideal of living a simple life with others. This experience gave me an intellectual understanding of community and inspired me to seek out and hear the stories of communities from many traditions.

In the 1980s, not long after we married, Marlene and I moved into our first home, on a small street in Cambridge, Ontario, in Canada. There our sons grew up with loving neighbors. Many of the families on that street celebrated holidays and birthdays together, swam together in the one pool on the street, and supported one another in the rearing of children. This profoundly shaped my understanding and adult experience of community.

Family has always been central to community for me and a source of many insights. The family I grew up in, and my extended family of cousins and uncles and aunts, influenced me profoundly. Marlene and our sons are amazing, fun, and supportive. And now Marlene's cousins and aunts and uncles—who publish a regular family newsletter called The Eppisode (the title refers to their last name, Epp)—are teaching me about community and bringing it into my life.

I have been blessed with jobs in great workplaces, with colleagues who collaborate to build neighborhoods and improve

communities to make the world a better place. Deep friendships have formed among us as we have worked together, committing ourselves to one another and a cause. While helping others to build community, we ourselves have become a community through our jobs, potlucks, celebrations, and parties.

The church I have attended for the past decade is filled with warm and caring people. Most have attended the church since they were children and have a deep sense of place there. The building is beautiful and the music heavenly. My primary reason for belonging, however, has not been to attend Sunday-morning worship services; it has been to gather with the community, to pray and reflect and be hopeful with others, to share in their lives and they in mine.

I feel community with friends who live in my city and with many who no longer do. Other communities in my life include the social circles Marlene and I belong to and my yoga studio.

Seeking Community

However, like so many people I hear from these days, I can feel isolated in the midst of a crowd. Even though I am surrounded by people I care about, I can feel alone, with less community in my life than I want. I realize that loneliness, fear, and a desire for happiness are constants in the human condition. Each one contributes to the feeling of being alone, though it is not always easy to see a direct cause-and-effect relationship.

Why do I—why do we—seek community when there are so many people in our lives?

A helpful analysis of the situation I find myself in—of the situation many of us find ourselves in—comes from the social critic Christopher Lasch, who wrote *The Minimal Self: Psychic*

Survival in Troubled Times to explore what he saw as a society-wide response to perceived threat. He describes life for those facing the threat of cosmic disaster, which, in the context of his times (he wrote the book in the mid-1980s), meant the nuclear arms race, terrorism, and rising crime:

> People take one day at a time. They seldom look back, lest they succumb to a debilitating "nostalgia"; and if they look ahead, it is to see how they can insure themselves against the disasters almost everybody now expects. Under these conditions, selfhood becomes a kind of luxury, out of place in an age of impending austerity. Selfhood implies a personal history, friends, family, a sense of place. Under siege, the self contracts to a defensive core, armed against adversity. Emotional equilibrium demands a minimal self, not the imperial self of yesteryear.

Our times are not that different from Lasch's, though we could add to his list of threats a marked increase in terrorism; the Internet's intensification of consumerism and challenge to our sense of self, through the conflation of public and private; and climate change. I believe that his analysis casts light on why we find community difficult today. It is far easier for us to flit from site to site on the Internet, to define ourselves by who and what we "like," to create a sense of self by what we buy and wear and use, than it is to build and sustain connections with one another in space and time. In some ways it is ironic that we call this activity "social" media when so much of it is created by individuals sitting alone at their computers or with their smartphones.

That said, many young people are building connections through the Internet, cleverly and determinedly finding ways to connect cybernetic and bricks-and-mortar community. (For exam-

ple, see Lucas's story in chapter 5.) As I know from my own work as a community activist, social media can be used to bring people together to celebrate or work on a common cause. However, this capability is ever in danger of succumbing to another element in our lives: our emphasis on individualism at the cost of community.

Defining, Choosing, and Making Community

I believe that today the onus is on us to define community, to choose community, to make community. Yes, this is a far piece from the simplicity of earlier times in which people's experience of community was defined by the circumstances of their birth—their family and place of birth. I accept that, today, community is largely situational. It changes at different stages of our lives. I might be very active in a spiritual community and have a tremendous sense of belonging, but then, after some time, that changes. I might play basketball with a group of guys every Thursday evening but have to accept that this is as far as I'm going to get in those men's lives. As a way of dealing with the fragmented feel of modern life, I am learning to take comfort in knowing that I do not need to hold on to one community, or even to consider one community my primary community—that there are many experiences of community.

I persist, however, in believing that deeper community is possible and may be engaged in at the same time. That finding joy together even in chaotic times is a real possibility. I am privileged, in my work, to witness people coming together to reduce poverty and to make their neighborhoods safe. I have seen ecosystems restored. I have seen food systems made more secure. And I have seen fear overcome. That is why I have written this book: to encourage us to do the work of community, to perform the "supply chain" of

efforts and acts that lead to the point at which we hand that bowl of chicken soup to an indisposed neighbor.

Specifically, in the next chapter, I explore the three community options—shallow community, fear-based community, and deep community. I follow that discussion with chapters on how we can turn away from fear, how we can turn toward deeper community, and how we can embrace the four acts of community life:

- Sharing our stories
- Taking the time to enjoy one another
- Taking care of one another
- Working together for a better world