

What IS community building about?

The last community building workshop I helped facilitate as part of Milwaukee's city-wide community building initiative was with people in a re-entry program supporting their transition from prison back to living in the city. I've also worked with a group of female youths locked up in the Juvenile Detention center, with a group of parents whose children were in the child welfare system, and with residents from the Amani neighborhood in the 53206 zip code. What were those workshops about? They were about the people present, their experiences and personalities, and whatever they were willing to risk enough to show and say to the group, some of whom were initially strangers.

I also participated in the first large public workshop in 2013 that kicked off this new incarnation of community building in the city. That group initially tried to develop an identity based in planning because it felt it was needed and it is "what leaders do." It is also much safer than being in the vulnerable and "heart-centered" space that is the core of community building. Yet the power in the community building process comes from when people "take our masks off" to share our unvarnished, emotional experiences and what has the most meaning in our lives.

For example, a prevalent theme in the re-entry from prison group was fathers. Both men and women shared quite personally covering emotions ranging from love to horrible trauma, from joy to regrets and hopes for the future. As a facilitator, I noticed how strongly my own feelings and memories about my father kept coming up. Part of what we learn in community building is what it means to be "moved to speak." Feeling so moved, I stepped away from my facilitator role to share my own story of early trauma with my father and the fruits of our long process of reconciliation. The group was still as I spoke through my tears, listening and accepting. To my joy, as we said our good-byes at the end of the workshop, one man who had been incarcerated many years hugged me and called me a kindred spirit.

This is what community building is really about: when people are willing to take enough risks, when people are willing to take the time, to set aside our biases and listen, to accept responsibility for the well-being of the group and to be with each other, rather than doing, we are gifted with a powerful spiritual reminder that we share the most important things in common despite our many differences. The primary lesson of community building learned in various countries, in prisons, in organizations and in programs is that the bond and understanding created when we invest the time in building community together allows our subsequent "doing" to be more effective and inclusive as well.

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