

Weaving Community:

Thoughts on the recent Community Building workshops run by Peter Block in South Africa.

By Cathy Park (April 2010)

I recently relocated to Cape Town and some days I feel like I'm the only one who is alone in a café (trying not to get cappuccino froth on my upper lip) surrounded and excluded by warm huddles of chatting friends. This sense of isolation, however, can easily shift into a heartwarming connection by exchanging greetings with a neighbor, sharing a smile with the petrol attendant or having the waiter in the café down the road ask me if I'll have the usual.

We are social animals and when those who we come across every day acknowledge our existence, we feel seen. Peter Block is a tall, wizardly-looking facilitator who has made it his life's work to bring change into the world through consent and connectedness, by building communities one room at a time in which each person is seen and heard.

I attended his two-day Community Building workshop, co-facilitated and hosted by Symphonia in Cape Town. By teatime on the morning of the first day, through his self-deprecating wit and poetic turn of phrase, Peter Block had begun to make a roomful of strangers feel connected, laugh at ourselves and open our minds to the possibilities of community building.

Although I think that community weaving is a more apt description, as the process is a gradual plaiting together of the threads that bind us as humans, a weaving together of the myriad colours and textures we each bring to create the rich tapestry of social fabric. It's about reminding us as humans in a room together that we are already connected through our blood, our bones, by the longings, the fears and the dreams that make us human.

The process that Peter Block shared with us begins with the design of the room, with small groups of three to four chairs scattered throughout. For Peter, the small group is the 'unit of transformation and the container for the experience of belonging.'

The first invitation offered by the twinkly-eyed Peter Block was for us to share a crossroads we were facing in our lives with the group of people with whom we were seated. Sharing this with three strangers made us anxious yet we did it and within a short space of time, our small collection of strangers had become a warm, connected web.

As the day progressed, we had regular invitations to get into small groups of varying sizes, from pairs to five, and share our responses to questions posed by Peter. These questions were carefully chosen, and form an essential part of his community building work. In order to begin weaving communities that focus on possibility and strength, he believes the questions that bring people

together are key. These questions come not from a deficiency mindset (i.e. what do you need so that I can help you?) but from gift mindedness (i.e. what gifts do we get from each other?), which is about recognizing that every community has what it needs within it to build itself.

Attending this workshop made me retrace and affirm my own development as a facilitator and community builder. My work has taken me to youth centers, corporate meeting rooms, prisons and inner city classrooms. In my work with young adults, business people, artists and juvenile offenders, I put them into small groups, and devise questions that invite them to talk to each other about their lives, their art, their businesses, their dreams. My focus is to help those in the room recognize their wealth: of experience, of strengths, of skills and resilience within them so that they can use this often eye-opening insight to make different choices and take their lives in new directions.

As the facilitator, my work is a delicate dance of stepping aside as much as I can without abdicating my role. My role is to create the space and bring the questions that will help the people in the room let their masks drop - whether of tough criminal, groomed bank manager or struggling artist – and connect with themselves and each other.

Over the years, my practice has evolved from the self-important notion that I was quite central to the process, to embodying more the true meaning of 'facilitator', from the French word '*faciliter*' meaning 'to make easy or easier'. In other words, I see my role now as making it easier for people to inhabit the space and begin weaving the web that brings us together and creates a strong base for us to make new choices. This is what it is to build community: it is humans in a room listening, sharing, and weaving the connecting threads amongst one another to create a living tapestry of social fabric.

As Peter Block says: 'Social fabric is created one room at a time, the one we are in at the moment.'

Cathy Park is an author, facilitator and entrepreneur, helping people create lives that are passionate, productive and profitable. She is learning daily the art of gentle being and artful doing. Contact her on: cathy@cathypark.co.za