

Navigating for a Community of Relationships

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The environment in which contemporary human services operate is more like a mangrove swamp than solid ground. It is a swamp which appears as hostile, difficult terrain where it is often difficult to find a patch of hard ground on which to stand. Swamps are generally viewed with disdain – they can be messy, unpleasant places – and yet they are now recognised as supporting the most amazing ecosystems.

The swampy environs of human services are the subject of this article in which I have contemplated how a service can work with and in a community. The map that I use to navigate this swampy terrain is informed by some of the principles of community development. It is a map which has various guide-posts which can help in broad navigation, but that has no set paths - each service must develop its own paths in relation to the directions it wishes to take.

The **first of these signposts** points us in the direction of asking what is this thing we call 'the community'. Before a service can work in, and with a community, there needs to be some analysis of what 'community' the service wishes to engage with. Increasingly we hear politicians and bureaucrats referring to the roles and responsibilities of 'the community', as though some solid entity exists out there which can take up where the government leaves gaps in its ever diminishing safety-net. 'The community' which is the subject of this rhetoric is an imagined entity. The notion that some kind of stable, static and enduring entity called 'the community' exists out there somewhere, is a myth. This is not to say that 'community' itself is mythical – but it does mean that we need to be a little more specific about what we understand by 'community'.

At the root of 'community' are human relationships – the different ways that people find to live with, and love one another – in informal and formal ways, through friendships, associations, organisations, interactions, and so on. The ways in which these relationships are portrayed often revolve around notions of harmony, mutuality, and closeness. What is left out of this quaint, nostalgic picture is what a real struggle relationships can actually be. Human relationships, as we all know, are filled with difficulties – they are hard work, requiring vast amounts of dedication and ongoing efforts and maintenance. This is not to say that relationships are never harmonious or wonderful, but only to say that they are filled with paradoxes: pleasure and pain, harmony and conflict.

Communities are not only more difficult than is often portrayed, but they are also more complex. People no longer live in single communities. More often, people are members of all sorts of communities, centred not just around localities, but also around identities and interests. And importantly, it should be emphasised that for many people, the fact that they have very few relationships within any of these spheres, is a major feature of their social marginalisation. It is increasingly recognised that a lack of relationships – a lack of community – is a key characteristic of disadvantage and poverty in Australia. For this reason, very often 'a community' does not exist for services to work with; increasingly one of the roles of human services is becoming that of building community. This means that rather than asking the question of how services can

work in and with communities, services are themselves being asked to build communities of people who can support, encourage, live with, and love one another.

The **second signpost** in this swampy terrain leads on from where the first one ends. If one of the ways in which services can work in and with communities is to become actively engaged in community building, then how do we go about doing this? Is the building of community something we can read about in books and apply to whatever context we work in? Again, I would suggest not. For human service organisations such a process is particularly challenging because the outcomes of engaging in community building are not always clearly identifiable in the short term. Their processes may not always appear logical or 'professional' from the perspective of funding bodies or service evaluators who are seeking clear, objective, quantitative outcomes.

Two particular challenges exist for services wishing to engage in community building. The first is how to ensure that communities are strong enough to be long-lasting. It is a common misconception that communities, in order that they remain harmonious, should be based around commonalities. I often hear the notion that the word 'community' is actually a combination of the words 'common' and 'unity'. Apart from the fact that this is not an accurate understanding of the roots of the word 'community', it is a very misleading interpretation of the realities of life in community. Building communities amongst people who are all similar (whether in terms of identity or interest or other characteristics) may seem less fraught with difficulties in the short term and yet, it is diversity, not 'common unity', which actually sustains communities in the long term. Just as the swamp is filled with diversity, and this diversity makes the ecosystem of the swamp sustainable, so too communities need diversity and difference – in terms of roles, capacities, personalities and interests – if they are to remain sustainable.

The second challenge for services in building communities lies in the fact that diverse communities are also those which are dynamic and ever-changing. The challenge is not to see communities in terms of achievements or outcomes, but to see them as continuing processes. This is not to say that community building happens in the dark, with no guiding method – community development has very clear methodologies and frameworks of analysis – they are methods and frameworks of how to engage in process, not how to determine or define outcomes. In engaging in community building one can be very clear about how one will go about working with people in open, democratic and participatory ways. And yet the methods of community development do not only rely on having the right 'tools' to create good processes – community building is much more about nurturing a 'spirit' of community than it is about applying techniques. Too often we hear of concepts like 'empowerment' or its newer alternative, 'capacity building', being interpreted as though they represent some kind of super tool which can be applied to 'create' community. It is crucial, if services are to become involved in community building, that opportunities are created for a diverse range of people to commune in spontaneous, creative and enjoyable ways that are not just exclusively related to their service functions.

The **third signpost** points both straight up and straight down; it points both in and out. It indicates that the engagement of services in the messy endeavour of inventing and creating community, presents challenges both to the outside environment in which a service exists, and to the inside, not just of the organisation, but to the inside of each person within that organisation. Engaging the process of building community means an engagement in a process of transformation – personally, professionally, and organisationally. For human service organisations I think this presents some challenges, particularly in the contemporary political and economic environment.

Services are under increasing pressure in the current political and economic environment. Financial management and accountability have, in many cases, been taken to such an extreme that I sometimes wonder how workers find the time to do anything outside of keeping statistics, and recording the cost-benefits of each activity they undertake. Most human services are working to full capacity, and yet they are often asked to take on even more work. The danger of this situation is that there is often only time for constant activity with little or no time for reflection on those activities. Further, whilst participatory community processes are now recognised as the ideal, they take a great deal of time and effort, and for many services the realities of the demands and pressures they face from the outside environment are such that this makes community processes impossible to sustain. If services are to be involved in building community this situation needs to be addressed internally and externally: through the creation of reflective spaces that are central to the workplace culture within an organisation; and externally, through the lobbying of funding bodies, making them aware of the realities of work which has, at its centre, community processes.

Building communities not only means building relationships between people but it also means building cooperative relationships between services and amongst the people within them. My map of community development makes me think of how a mangrove tree presents us with another picture of how services could work with and in a community.

Mangrove trees do not exist in isolation – nature has realised that a single mangrove tree at the edge of the water is too susceptible to the push and pull of the tides. Rather, mangrove trees exist in clusters and they link their roots in such a way that each tree connects with each other tree, the root systems intertwined, supporting the entire group of trees. The strength of the root system means that it is much more difficult for one tree to be pushed over, and together the trees support an amazing ecosystem. The contemporary environment in which human services exist is one which makes it very difficult for services to formally interconnect – they are increasingly subject to competition policies, administrative demands from funding bodies, applications of privatisation and management ideologies, and the list goes on. And yet, if services are to work with and in communities in ways which build community, then the values of interconnection, cooperation and integration are central – not just as abstract principles, but as enacted components of the work which services undertake.

Community building involves processes that are slow, small-scale, unpredictable, fragile, and often difficult – but which also can be beautiful, touching, and heart-warming. Community building is not something that can be done in isolation either by one person in an organisation, or by one service acting in isolation from others. It involves the invention of ways of making the most micro-actions reflective of the principles of participation and justice. It requires a commitment to making real, the power of creativity and spontaneity. It demands a valuing of diversity and difference in all facets of work, and is founded on a belief in the possibilities of the impossible.

Services can and do have a role to play in building community. To do so involves some very real challenges that require making conscious decisions to undertake journeys into rather swampy environments, in which plans change, maps are only vague guides, and where each one of us, whether ‘provider’ or ‘recipient’, becomes explorer and inventor of never-ending stories.