

# Creating Our Communities

A proposal for a Development Discussion project  
for the Interactivity Foundation – December 2019

**Introduction:** Martin Luther King famously envisioned the ideal of a “beloved community” as a place not only desegregated by law but one integrated in spirit, a place where people of all walks, all beliefs, and all races live and work peacefully side by side. Nearly sixty years hence, we seem more distant than ever from King’s idealized vision.

And of those intervening years, political scientist Robert Putnam has argued, controversially, that America’s civic and social capital has declined significantly and to the great detriment of our commonweal. More and more, we are not only bowling alone, we are actively ripping apart the always threadbare and patchwork fabric of various civic and social associations that—under one view—nurture the necessary habits of the heart for democracy: public trust, tolerance, political engagement, equity, and civil discourse, among others.



Importantly there are also other, far less idealistic or approving views of the roles of community or civil society. Communities are inherently exclusionary; some are “in”, and most everyone else is out: the “others”—especially if they are different, they live (or lived) somewhere else, look different, speak, worship, celebrate, play, or love differently, or they have less/more wealth, or income, or education, etc. They have bred and continue to nurture prejudice, bigotry, discrimination, and conflict rather than trust, tolerance, understanding, and peace.

This project proposes to explore the meaning and significance of community, of our social capital, our civic associations, and civil society. What are our ideals, if any, for our communities—beloved or otherwise? How distant are our communities—both past and present—from these ideals? And, finally, what kinds or forms of different communities or civil society, if any, might we envision for our future?



Somewhat more particularly, this project will ask and attempt to answer, in different ways, the following questions, among many others:



- What are or have been the different communities in our lives? What organizations, institutions, groups, clubs, neighborhoods, and other societies (formal or informal) are you in or have you been in? And who was “out?”
- What does “community” or civil society mean to us, as individuals, as members of society, as citizens? What outcomes, qualities, values, habits, etc. for good or ill do we hope and/or fear that our communities nurture?
- What are—or could be—the benefits for individuals and for our polity of healthy communities, denser networks of civic association?

- How do we think our sense of community has been affected by—
  - Racism, xenophobia, regionalism, partisanship, classism, etc.?
  - changing technology and media?
  - other values—especially individualism
  - growing income disparities, decline (decimation) of the middle class, rise of dual income households, less free time, etc.

**Some Possible Starting Questions  
(choose only a couple to get started):**



**A. What does “community” or “civil society” mean to you?**

1. What are some of the communities that you are (or were) a member of?

- What were your childhood communities like? Did you know your neighbors? Did you want to? And how diverse (or not) were your neighbors by race, income/wealth, education, political views? Did these communities have multiple and strong connections among their members or were there relatively few and weak connections?
- And what about your current communities? Same questions
- What about your “non-placed based” communities?
  - a. Those of common interest – church, sports, hobbies, clubs, politics/causes, volunteer organizations, etc.
  - b. Or work-related communities; people you work with or have worked with?
  - c. Or “official” functions: as an officer or board member of any organization
  - d. Communities based on or supported by social media

2. When you think of your communities (past and present, place-based and others), do you have a generally positive or negative (or both) reaction or association and why?

**B. What makes for a healthy or well-functioning community or civil society?**

- What characteristics/qualities does it have?
- What essential functions does it serve or perform for its members?
- What is necessary to develop and sustain it?

**C. Imagining a new and different world or time (or an idea for a movie setting or plot), what are the different kinds of communities that you can imagine?**

- What kind of place(s) or common interests define these communities?
- How does community or civil society function (or not function) in your movie and with respect to individuals, family, government, religion, etc.?