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Building communities one room at a time

This week I learnt that building a community is difficult. And I learnt that it is so very easy.

I attended a workshop that was conducted by Peter Block, an American authority on the reconciliation of community.

Over two emotionally draining, yet invigorating days, I experienced how quickly a community can be formed. We were challenged to pour out our deepest fears, hopes, sadness and joy to people we had never met. It was so hard, yet we, as individuals and then as a collective, persisted. And as we did, it became easier and easier, deeper and deeper, until it was hard to believe that we don't communicate like this with everyone, all the time.

Peter Block believes that this is how social fabric is built, one room at a time, and that the small group is the unit of transformation. Large-scale transformation then occurs when enough small groups shift towards the larger change that we wish to experience in our societies.

He maintains that the existing community context, in countries like the United States and within certain communities in South Africa (my presumption), is one that markets fear, assigns fault and worships self-interest and that this context supports the belief that the future will be improved with new laws, more oversight and stronger leadership.

The new context, one that restores community, is one of possibility, generosity and gifts.

Block challenged us to ask questions, instead of offering answers. He encouraged us to declare a possibility that we could create, a future beyond reach, that has the power to transform our communities. He urged us to recognise our gifts and the gifts of others and to make use of these gifts in everything we do. He inspired us to open our hearts.

It is an incredibly hard process to describe, but it had immense power. In the space of two short days, a community formed out of a room of strangers from all walks of life. In hindsight it was so easy.

The workshop was organised by the remarkable Louise van Rhyn of Symphonia. Louise is a phenomenon, a dynamo with a passion for this country that is quite beautiful.

When I emailed her to say thank you for making the workshop a reality, she replied by saying: "When the [Dinokeng Scenarios](#) were published, I had such a strong sense of being called - to do what I can to make the Walk Together scenario a reality."

"This week was a further refinement of that calling; walking together will only be possible if we are able to reclaim our humanity and become connected as human beings. So my commitment is to develop the capacity for community building in South Africa so that we can ignite communal possibility.

"Imagine if we can be a country where we are able to move away from a focus on individual achievement and truly live our Ubuntu heritage!"

She continued: "(Earlier this year) I expressed an intention to recruit a million South Africans to commit to walking together. This last week has made me re-think this. I think the task is to create opportunities for a million people to experience a deep sense of connection with fellow South Africans. I have no doubt that this will automatically lead to walking together but the starting point is connection and community rather than focusing on the work that needs to be done."

Louise is striving to give a million South Africans the beautiful gift of connection and community. She is striving to make an immense positive difference in the land that she so loves.

She is doing it, one room at a time.

By Ian Macdonald