



Newsletter # 253 | 23 March 2010

Can building strong communities combat crime?

What is the secret to combatting crime? This question has frustrated me time and time again and as I've asked people in the police force, politics and business this question, no one has had a certain answer.

This question has once again been in the forefront of my mind after attending a community building workshop by award winning author, Peter Block, who was in South Africa recently.

For the first time, I think I've found a satisfactory link in the chain to overcoming our biggest evil, although that certainly wasn't the focus of the workshop.

The Peter Block Community Building workshops were held across the country and were organised by Symphonia, a non-profit organisation that leads and initiates projects intended to engage South Africans in the process of nation building.

With people from different tribes and races, ages and religions, the unemployed and executives, nuns and journalists, Peter Block set out to make a community out of all of us in two days.

I was expecting to be spoken at, as most motivational speakers do, with little interaction from the participants. But Block is about as un-American as they come. He offers an alternative to the patriarchal beliefs that dominate many global cultures and his approach offered structure to interactive group sessions without being dogmatic.

We all know that South Africa's communities are particularly fragmented given our racial history, but our fragmentation is also seen in the great divide between rich and poor, the high walls and electric fencing in wealthy suburbs, and the stark lifestyle differences between sectors of the population.

This fragmented community context that most of us function in is one that markets fear, assigns fault and worships self-interest. This context supports the belief that the future will only be improved when government passes new crime laws, when there's more heavy-handedness and when we get stronger leadership. Isn't it true – we are so quick to blame government for crime and the problems in our communities!

It's not that Block doesn't believe in accountable governments, but he helps us realise our inherent power as citizens. We become powerful when we choose to shift the context within which we act (always expecting authority figures to effect change) and realise that we have the capacity to exercise power rather than delegate it to others. As a community, we have all the resources we need to solve every problem that will face us. Good news indeed.

Block's workshops are based on his book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, in which there are six key conversations that any group of people will have as they become a community.

The first conversation to have is the invitation, where people venture out of their comfort zones to make contact with people they've never connected with before.

The second, possibility conversation is one that focuses on what we want our future to be as opposed to problem solving the past. When we talk about the possibilities, we break free from conformity, embrace our creativity and take ownership for the ideals that will push us toward the future we want to create.

The third conversation around ownership causes us to take responsibility for the role we play in creating the current realities in our communities, as opposed to playing the blame game, which doesn't bring any real change to the community.

In real communities, people must have the space to say 'no' and express their doubts and reservations. The dissent conversation allows for true commitment, because unless people are free to say no, they cannot be truly free to say yes.

No community can function properly without commitment from its members. Talking about 'what promise am I willing to make to this enterprise?' facilitates this commitment. This conversation is about each one giving to benefit the whole, as opposed to

seeking personal gain.

The last conversation revolves around each person's gifts. "What are the assets I bring to the enterprise?" Rather than focus on people's deficiencies and weaknesses, validating people with their essential core and contributions has the potential to make the difference and change lives for good.

For Serena Naidu, from one of South Africa's biggest corporations, the workshop sparked a new passion to invest in South Africa. "When I saw the list of attendees, I thought what are all these different people going to talk about? I have often conversed in the corporate world, but here I connected. The key to the connection in our groups was the questions we asked each other. The questions didn't lead you to the "right answer" but to the unknown, which meant each one had to bring themselves to the conversation."

The reason Peter Block's tools work so well is because he is a genius at facilitating the process. The concepts are not new to any of us, but they have been used in such a way that when I saw groups of strangers get together to ask the key questions over two days, the group members found themselves willing to be vulnerable, feeling empowered by the recognition of their unique gifts and committing to make a difference.

So what does all of this have to do with fighting crime? Well, since experiencing community building first-hand, I think it's a big key to combatting crime.

My husband and I have just bought a house in an old suburb of Johannesburg that is free from electric fencing and snobbery. The community is far from perfect and lots of work needs to be done, which I'm excited about. But this is a community where the last attempted break-in in our street was thwarted by a neighbour who was quick to care. The local security company was there within minutes, frightening the potential crooks.

I cannot guarantee that criminals won't walk our streets, but I can be part of building a community where we are all responsible for each other's safety. And this is exactly what I'm going to be doing.

Julie Cunningham

Do you have any positive stories or testimonies about your community overcoming adversity, division, challenges or crime together? Send your stories to Julie @sagoodnews.co.za

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Last Week's Good News

[Musicians shout out against crime](#)

Wednesday, 17 March 2010

A host of South African celebrities have come together to launch a cover version of the 1980's hit song 'Shout' to kickstart a campaign against crime.

[Read more...](#)

[International artists to perform at World Cup Kick-Off Concert](#)

Wednesday, 17 March 2010

A jam-packed line up of international and local musicians was announced today for the Fifa World Cup Kick-Off Celebration Concert, which will take place at the Orlando Stadium in Soweto on June 10th.

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[Taxi hand signals get stamped](#)

Thursday, 18 March 2010

Travel along any of Johannesburg's streets and avenues, and one of the most common sights is of people standing on the side of the road, making various hand signals in a sort of unofficial sign language.

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[Capitec named among 'Great Brands of Tomorrow'](#)

Monday, 15 March 2010

South Africa's Capitec Bank is the only African brand to crack the list of "Great Brands of Tomorrow", issued by the renowned Swiss-based financial services group Credit Suisse.

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[South Africa to fast-track human trafficking law](#)

Wednesday, 17 March 2010

South Africa is to fast-track a comprehensive new law against human trafficking before the start of the soccer World Cup, Justice Minister Jeff Radebe said on Tuesday.

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[2010 Cape visitors to get unique tourism radio service](#)

Tuesday, 16 March 2010

International visitors who will be cruising around the Western Cape during the 2010 FIFA World Cup in rental cars will be able to tune in to Tourism Radio, a station designed to entertain and educate them while en route.

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Our [TogetherSchools](#) initiative, that aims to build effective partnerships between government, the private sector and NGOs in providing holistic, developmental and sustainable solutions in dysfunctional schools, is gathering momentum. We are looking for more businesses to assist us in helping to make our schools safe, healthy, happy place of learning where results improve year on year.

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We will publish the best stories and viewpoints on our website &/or in our weekly newsletter.

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As we do not send unrequested emails, please check that they are happy to receive the newsletter before signing them up!

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Quote of the Week

"The absence of belonging is so widespread that we might say we are living in an age of isolation, imitating the lament from early in the last century, when life was referred to as the age of anxiety."
~ Peter Block ~

Keep in Touch

If you have any suggestions or contributions for this newsletter, please contact Julie.
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