

# Building social capital

**Craig K. Comstock**

If you live in the Ashland area, where this is written, you have a somewhat better chance of finding community than in the average place. Apart from our famous theaters and outdoor life, we dwell within a dense network of voluntary associations such as a heavily-attended YMCA, many spiritual groups, service clubs, men's groups, civic associations, "heart circles" and activities such as ecstatic dance, art classes, hikes, sports, computer clinics, hobby groups and parade committees. As everyone who lives in the Rogue Valley knows, the real treasure of the area is not only what tourists come for, but also the residents themselves.

The atmosphere can even become a little self-congratulatory, in the style of the Bostonian who, when asked how to get to Chicago, said only, "by way of Braintree," which is a suburb of Boston. Italians would call this *capanilismo*, or pride in what lies within sight of a village's central tower. In my judgment, many places have the makings of community, or at the very least, a strong yearning for it.

Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam defines social capital as "connections among individuals--social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." For readers, the drive for building social capital goes back seven years to the publication of *Bowling Alone*, his study of the waning of voluntary associations during the past generation or two. A rich network of associations has been a pride of U.S. society at least since the French visitor de Tocqueville praised our civic culture in 1835. Putnam could foresee its revival, but his book was mainly a detailed account of its withering.

Everybody over a certain age can recall a country where it was the norm for neighbors to know and help one another, and for people to see one another more often. Now we chuckle uneasily over a New Yorker cartoon showing a man saying into the phone something like, "No, Thursday is no good for me. How about never. Is never good for you?"

What happened to this country? Analysts point to careers in which big rewards demand long hours; hours spent commuting from the suburbs; both partners working; an expansion of low-paying jobs; geographic mobility (here today, gone tomorrow); vituperative political discourse; and the relentless spread of TV and computer screens, including the Internet.

Having met my wife through the Internet, I appreciate its reach in discovering people, products, news, and data. But community depends on prolonged face-to-face interaction, so that a norm of reciprocity can arise, so trust can be established.

Trust is hard to create in a world of screen names and impostors, “be anything you want,” and sudden disappearances, whatever the corresponding virtues of the cyber world.

Under present conditions, the main question about social capital is, what can attract people to more face-to-face interactions where they live? Some writers seem to assume we can rebuild the sort of voluntary associations that once thrived. They seem to be saying, if only we had more bridge circles and service clubs and bowling leagues, happy days would be here again.

Even if a well-organized bowling team could draw people away from whatever TV series will follow “The Sopranos,” rebuilding the old network of voluntary associations, by itself, seems a dubious strategy. There are too many powerful distractions today that we didn’t have back then. What would work now?

Perhaps small groups devoted to deep relationships and, in some cases, a shared task. Just kibitzing around a bridge table may not be enough, for some, to draw them away from a high definition screen. But they might be drawn by a deeper group relationship than they ordinarily experience.

This is the premise of at least two “social inventions” found in Ashland, the Mankind Project (MKP) “training adventure” co-created by Bill Kauth, and the “heart circles” promoted and described by Tej Steiner.

Along with some 400 men living in the Rogue Valley, I have done the MKP adventure, a sort of basic training for emotional literacy. It is an opportunity for men to monitor and describe how they feel, confront their “shadows,” define their missions in life, and talk with other men about something beyond sports, politics, work, or women. After a deeply absorbing weekend, the training continues in weekly “integration groups,” some of which continue for years past the obligatory eight sessions.

At meetings and even social occasions, graduates begin with a “check-in,” telling how they are feeling and, depending on the size of the group, exploring the challenges they face. MKP lays stress on keeping one’s word and speaking from the heart.

Tej Steiner has developed a model for emotional intimacy that differs from MKP groups in several ways: it doesn’t require a prior “training adventure,” it’s open to women as well as men, and it keeps returning to the question, “what do you want?” In Steiner’s experience, this question elicits deep goals of which people were sometimes unaware, or which they didn’t dare assume they’d find support for, or feel big enough to pursue.

In Ashland, men and women are forming “heart circles” based on Steiner’s book of the same name: 14 so far, with a goal of 100 within a year. He defines these circles as “an innovative social structure in which 3-10 people gather weekly with the intention of exploring what each member wants to create.”

There are a few simple rules that establish a “safe container”: strict confidentiality, commitment to attend meetings, mutual support, honest questioning. Under these conditions, people can open up, “create deep friendships, ”and thus build social capital.

According to Steiner, heart circles offer immediate rewards (including an opportunity for “life-planning,” “celebratory events,” and collaboration), and are both beneficial under current conditions and indispensable if times ever got hard.

Above all, heart circles work by creating a format, an opportunity. In the revision of his book, Steiner is planning to explore formats for couples, churches, schools, and families. For example, at one family’s Thanksgiving dinner, a member of the middle generation proposed that each person around the table tell what he or she felt grateful for in the past year and this person then modeled the behavior. After all the exclamations about the tenderness of the turkey, this talk from the heart started slowly but it soon picked up, and there was no rush to serve the pumpkin pie before the last person in the circle had spoken. The family felt closer, having shared things they would never ordinarily have talked about.

Along with helpful formats, participants need to have at least a basic level of emotional literacy and group process. Several of the many paths were pioneered or are taught by Valley residents Bill Kauth, Ron Kurtz and Mary Miller and their colleagues.

Kauth is associated with “shadow work,” both in the creation of the Mankind Project training, and in recent preparation for launching what he and fellow “champions” call *Communitas*. A metaphor taken from Jung, the “shadow” refers to the parts of the psyche of which we are ashamed, from which we’re often cut off, and which we may project onto others, in the way that Hitler, who plotted world domination, accused the “elders of Zion” of doing the same.

As long as we fail to acknowledge and become acquainted with our shadow, it rules our lives and allows us to feel self-righteous as we condemn others as evildoers. We are the “good guys” and no means are too terrible for dealing with the enemy.

Decades ago, Ron Kurtz developed a psychotherapy called Hakomi which is now practiced by a set of talented professionals in the U.S. and many other countries. Recently, Kurtz simplified this approach down to its essentials. He is convinced that, with some assistance, ordinary people can use his method for understanding themselves and thus improving their skills of relationship. “If you’re going to build a community based on good will and trust,” he says, “members must learn to know themselves.”

His method turns away from the stories we tell about ourselves in favor of identifying the “butlers,” or automatic and unconscious habits, that run our lives. These butlers are often detectable from our posture, gestures, and the way we talk (in contrast to what we say).

The problem is not so much identifying the butlers as acknowledging this information. Before a session, both the therapist (or friend) and the client (or self-inquirer) go into what Kurtz calls “loving presence.” This has at least two aspects: being here now, and showing delight in what you see. Kurtz starts by finding something he likes about the client. His job is not to change the person, but to provide the safe space in which the person can understand him- or herself better and develop new patterns.

Familiar to meditators, “loving presence” is based on Eastern practices, but generated also in “heart circles” when participants feel compassion for the struggle we share. Very different from the modes of showing off and of judging, loving presence just witnesses and trusts. The purpose of the method, Kurtz explains, is “bringing old adaptations into consciousness so they can be examined in the light of present reality.”

In turn, this attitude helps in mediation work, as in the Medford organization directed by Mary Miller. Its list of advice about how to resolve conflict includes: “talk directly to the person with whom you have the problem,” “don’t blame or call names,” “give information about your own feelings” instead of trying to interpret the other person’s behavior, show you’re listening, “get all ... issues and feelings out into the open,” be specific, and follow through. Clearly, any community that hopes to persist needs ways of resolving conflict, which happens even if people feel they share many values and even if they follow the same leader.

Apart from the Mankind Project, the Heart Circles and Mediation Works, what are some organizations in the new cycle in the Valley? To mention only a few examples I happen to have run across, Taylor Kohn and Leslie Lanes started the Rose Circle for mentoring girls between the ages of 11 and 15; Pete Young helped initiate the Boys to Men program locally; and Marion Spadone and friends developed the Natural Death Care Circle. (It was Pete Young who won one of the “Imagine” award this year from Mediation Works.)

The Rose Circle and the Boys to Men program are designed to help girls and boys, respectively, through the perils and opportunities of puberty and adolescence. The circle Spadone gathered is intended to care for another stage of life: the last, or rather, just after the last. Drawing on the wisdom of traditional Jewish burial societies, it offers members and loved ones a nonsectarian alternative to standard funerals. What these programs have in common is the challenges they face are major.

In easy times and hard, social capital helps. As long as the economy hums along, we can get away with “cocooning,” with retreating to the house, family, and a glowing screen. But if oil becomes expensive, as it seems to be doing, if supply begins to decline and demand to rise, then the growing cost would touch everything: the gas pump of course, but also the heating bill for many, the price of food, of all manufactured items that use oil, and of nearly all deliveries. If the system of industrial agriculture ever becomes too expensive, how would local people work together to grow more of our food? (See my article in Jefferson Monthly, “Tilling Our Own Soil,” at [www.ijpr.org/Feature.asp?FeatureID=598](http://www.ijpr.org/Feature.asp?FeatureID=598))

Some of the motive for “relocalizing” comes from distaste for globalization, which in the U.S. is another word for using the cheapest labor for anything that can be shipped and selling government bonds to finance the resulting imbalance of trade. And some of the motive comes from a concern this system may collapse, back to the national and regional and finally even the local level.

Even without imaging a collapse in the globalized economy, many people have a nostalgia now for small town life. Several generations before ours were warned away from an earlier version of this life by such classics of U.S. literature as Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, and Babbitt and Main Street by Sinclair Lewis. It was Lewis who worried that “when fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross.” (To be crystal clear, the novelist did not mean that respect for the flag or the cross indicated fascist tendencies; just that both symbols could be used by those with little respect for genuine democracy.) For generations, some of the brightest small town talent couldn’t wait to get away to the opportunities of the big city.

This brings us to Francis More Lappe, author of Democracy’s Edge and a recent visitor to the Rogue Valley where she drew a capacity crowd in one of SOU’s biggest halls. Years ago, Lappe’s breakthrough came when she realized that world hunger was caused not by a shortage of food, but by its maldistribution and inefficient use. (In the latter category, she discussed how many calories were lost by feeding animals for their meat rather than eating the corn or soybeans directly.) With regard to rectifying the maldistribution of food, she came to what she calls “deep democracy.”

Our problem, she says, is not a particular President, but the idea that democracy consists simply of voting for a party’s choice (or, in many cases, watching others do so). In her view, this is “thin” (or shallow?) democracy. Only if people have the power to deliberate and decide, and the education to decide wisely, can we attain deep democracy. Her vision is close to that of Jefferson, who proposed that states be broken down into “wards” small enough that citizens could have an effect and know it.

Another recent visitor to the Rogue Valley was Serge Lub, cofounder of Friendly Favors, a computer-based network that encourages gifts of time and goods (or, as the name says, favors). A successful designer and businessman, Lub knows the merits of the standard exchange-based economy, but also its limitations. He has devoted some of his profits to building community in the Bay Area and to creating Friendly Favors, which has members all over the world.

As a member of FF, you can do something or give something to another member, who then credits your account with a number of “favors.” You can then give these credits to some member who offers something you want. Note that the result is much more flexible than barter; it is closer to an alternative currency, honored by the members, each of whom is sponsored by someone who is already a member.

The key to the system is trust. In doing favors, you trust that others will do them for you: the norm of extended reciprocity. This is not the dollar economy; the “favors” are backed not by the “full faith and credit” of the U.S. government, whatever that may mean, but rather by the stability and fairness of the system itself. An inveterate traveler, Lub seldom has to pay for a hotel; people appreciate his talents as a networker on behalf of others.

Another glimpse of the spirit of gifting is afforded by the annual “Abundance Swap,” founded in Ashland by Jeff Golden. Held just as holiday shopping picks up, the abundance event invites people to bring not junk but things they would be happy to give as gifts. The items are laid out in a large hall. When it’s your turn to walk around, you just take an item that you like. There is no swap in the narrow sense; rather, the giving and receiving of gifts. This event has become popular in Ashland and has spread to other communities.

The issue of trust also comes up in our public discourse. Anybody who listens to the radio, even in the car between cell phone calls, has heard toxic language about political opponents and viewpoints. “Liberal” is said with all the good humor and respect accorded to murderers, rapists, and traitors. (Did I forget terrorists?) “Guests” are torpedoed and insulted; their microphones, cut off.

Among the airwaves of transmitted loathing, “Jefferson Exchange” has been a model of civility and serious inquiry on vexing public issues. Hosted for nearly a decade by Jeff Golden, the show has combined a point of view with respect for, and evocation of, other ways of seeing things. In a sense, it’s been a training for productive and civil public discourse. Helping people present their opinions, drawing them out, looking at them from many sides, takes presence of mind and strength on the part of the host. This is different from the talents of the bully, who is just an authoritarian, deferential to anyone who seems more powerful, brutal to those perceived as inferior or alien. Intense and open inquiry differs, too, from the calculations of those who try to appear “mavericks” by reversing their views when polls show they no longer represent their constituency.

A dense network of face-to-face voluntary associations has been a chief strength of the U.S., which is why readers were alarmed by the decline apparent in Putnam’s statistics. I encountered foreign admiration for this feature of U.S. life when working to help end the Cold War. A Soviet named Gennady Alferenko had bucked or evaded the system to start a dance club in a provincial city. Ordinarily all associations had to be approved by, and integrated into, the ruling party, as in Germany under Hitler.

When Alferenko wrote about the club in the newspaper of the young Communists and invited similar proposals, he in effect opened a national suggestion box on how to improve shopping, how to care for veterans of the Afghanistan war, how to design better housing, you name it. Suggestions piled up in the news room of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. Without quite meaning to, Alferenko had built some social capital.

What are the main points that have emerged in this quick review of social capital?

1. Instead of trying to revive the past, we can ask, what face-to-face interactions are attractive enough to lure us away from the glowing screens? If certain social forms have waned in part because of technological changes, they would have a hard time competing for time in current conditions. Programs that offer deep group relationships are most likely to succeed.

2. Deep group relationships don't just happen by accident. They rely on certain undertakings and practices. One is confidentiality; another is support rather than rapid judgment; and a third is awareness of and sharing of feelings. These groups can have a goal in the outside world, or exist strictly for the sharing found in close friendship.

3. There are many partial answers and hints and models to develop further. From the perspective of the Rogue Valley, this article has mentioned the Mankind Project, heart circles, Hakomi self-inquiry, programs for adolescent girls and boys, Mediation Works, the Natural Death Care Circle, Friendly Favors, the Abundance Swap, and the "Jefferson Exchange." I hope readers will bring forward many other examples.

4. It's valuable to find programs that would be beneficial under current conditions and indispensable in hard times. Starting vegetable gardens, and programs to build social capital, are two obvious examples. Even if nothing challenging happens, these things offer immediate value. If times ever got hard, they'd give us a valuable head start.

5. Politicians typically win favor by articulating a view shared by more of the community than the alternative views, by bringing government benefits, and by associating with voters. Sometimes campaigns incidentally build temporary social capital, as people share the narrow goal of electing a particular candidate. Would it be possible to build a campaign around the theme of social capital?

--Craig K. Comstock is showing a series of his paintings, "Matrix for the Birth of Dragons," at Pangea at 272 E. Main St. in Ashland, OR, starting August 21. A former foundation director and author, Craig has a website at [www.bookcreationcoach.com](http://www.bookcreationcoach.com)