Life in the Community - Ruth Gerzon

Ko koe, ko au, ko tāua, ko tātou katoa kia mahi tahi

You, me, we, us, together we make a community

Like many of my generation, I lament the disappearance of the sense of community we knew when we were young. In the fifties, we freely shared gifts of time, expertise and resources. We mowed a neighbour’s lawn, gave them a lift to hospital, shared food from our gardens and cared for one another’s children. These acts of kindness built up connections and trust. We made a real effort to know and get on with our neighbours. Together we solved problems, contributed to each other’s lives and provided support at times of hardship. Community was essential to a good life.

Yet we now know, to our shame, that the picture was not so rosy. Our vibrant communities excluded most disabled people. They had been removed, isolated and segregated in institutions.

Towards the end of last century community spirit weakened. Many causes were mooted: the rise of TV, growing materialism, longer working hours and families moving in search of work. Yet, whatever the cause, the effect was to entrench money as the basis of relationships. The gifts that strengthened communities gradually became things we purchase. We now pay people to care for our children and our elders. We pay for lawn mowing services and home care, and buy ready cooked meals. Provided we have enough money, or hours of state support, we could say that we do not need anyone. We no longer need our neighbours.

Yet our hearts tell us that we need more than warmth, shelter and food. A good life is based on a sense of belonging and purpose. Paid relationships can never fulfil our emotional needs for love and acceptance, never give us a sense of connection, of belonging.

Paid relationships require nothing from us, apart from our money. They make us into passive recipients of care and support. Only gifts of time and resources, freely given and accepted, come with the love that builds enduring friendships; friendships that enrich our lives.

When disaster strikes, money is not the first or only answer. We have seen neighbourhoods come together in the Christchurch earthquakes and in towns devastated by flooding. Some emergency services told volunteers to stay home and wait for professional help. They quickly learnt that this was a grave mistake. The essence of community - a willingness to help one another – remains and the volunteers’ energy and commitment brought emotional support that paid services can never provide.

We live in uncertain times. Earthquakes, global financial collapse, environmental disasters and extreme weather events leave many people fearful. How can we secure a future for any of our children, let alone our disabled children, who are often more vulnerable than the others?

Faced with the spectre of global financial collapse, Charles Eisenstein was asked if we should hoard gold. His answer: 'If you have gold the men with guns will come and take it away.' To create security for ourselves and our families, we must not build mansions with high fences and security cameras, but rather give our time, support and help to those around us. These gifts inspire gratitude and generosity and nurture what Eisenstein calls the ‘gift economy’, creating ‘real wealth’, wealth that goes far beyond what can be bought and sold. In the money culture the more you give, the less you have. The gift culture works in the opposite way: the more you give, the richer you become. If we are generous, when we are in need, help will be there for us.

There are many forms of community. For many of us, our extended family/whanau or hapu forms our richest, long term connections. We choose to belong to other communities, based on our faith or interests. We join sports, service and political groups, organisations that preserve the environment, or ethnic groups focussed on maintaining culture. In all these settings, problems are discussed, opinions formed and group actions taken. Some such communities are national or even international, but the richest are local, with frequent face to face interaction.

About 100 years ago, in the early 20th century, communities were also weak. History tells us of rising crime and alcoholism, and fewer people wishing to engage and help one another. Out of this ferment new groups formed, such as Scouts and Guides, Plunket, Red Cross, service clubs, Maori Women’s Welfare League, the revival of Kingitanga. All these arose during the first decades of the last century, and underpinned the rebuilding of communities.

Now these organisations struggle to find members and volunteers, and again we see a rise in violent crime, alcoholism and suicide. Some older people, becoming fearful, have chosen to segregate themselves in rest home villages.

Yet there are encouraging signs that communities are once more growing stronger. Environmental groups, book clubs, neighbourhood support groups and community gardens are springing up in almost every town and suburb. New market days bring farmers to town and locals gather and talk.

The internet is invaluable. It not only helps us connect across the globe, but increasingly supports local connections. Through time banks and websites such as Ask Share Give people offer their time, skills and goods for free.

So how can we ensure that in this century’s resurgence of communities, disabled people have a central place?

We firstly need to acknowledge that involvement in communities is not always easy for disabled people and their families. More tasks and time spent on care can mean they have less time to contribute to the lives of others. And, in spite of the increasing visibility of disabled children in inclusive schools, discrimination is still rife. Unpleasant experiences may lead some disabled people and their families/whanau to bunker down, avoiding unfamiliar places.

Yet for the sake of our children and grandchildren, we need to engage. We can begin by ensuring they spend time in places where people gather. We can search our communities for opportunities to contribute. We can focus on the skills, abilities and gifts that disabled people can bring to communities. Even the smallest contribution enables them to make the journey from being passive recipients of care to being active and contributing members of communities.

Given the global situation, it is likely that future generations will be challenged in ways we can only imagine. But people surrounded by relationships that offer mutual care and support, belonging and a sense of purpose, can still lead rich lives in times of hardship. Only communities can offer security and a promise of a good life.

Governments can never rebuild communities. They are based on connection and trust, so it is up to us all. Each time we contribute and build relationships, we build a better future for our children and grandchildren. And if we do it in a way that honours our values of inclusion, this time our communities will truly be for everyone.