

John McKnight: A Voice for Vital Community - November 22, 1931 - November 2, 2024

"The associational world is the vital center of citizen production that is the foundation of our democracy — powered by trust." – John L. McKnight

I never met John McKnight, but in recent years I read two of his books after running across a reference to him in the writings of William White, I believe it may have been in [Recovery Rising A Retrospective of Addiction Treatment and Recovery Advocacy](#). The two books I read were [The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits](#) and [The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods](#) that he wrote with Peter Block. There is also a direct reference to his work in a blog post coauthored by William White and Recovery Review founder and colleague Jason Schwartz in 2017 titled [Toward a "Conspiracy of Hope."](#) McKnight passed a few weeks back, his [funeral home remembrance is here](#), his [obituary in the Chicago Tribune is here](#). McKnight was aware of the addiction recovery movement that rose up in the late 90s. In his book *Carless Society*, he referenced it as a hopeful sign for our society.



I found a blog post titled [Leading Differently Useful Explorations for People Who Want to Change the World](#) by John Hamerlinck who did know him and wrote that "John McKnight was a modest, unassuming man who changed the lives of thousands of people throughout the world. He encouraged them to work with others in their communities, especially the marginalized, to improve everyone's quality of life. His legacy is profound." As noted in writings to describe his work, his focus was on how "professionalized services" have destroyed the very communities they are designed to help and focused on the power of community to heal itself communities by drawing on their own talents and strengths to support a more vitalized society.

I believe that he would agree that it is not too late to restore American community and that doing so could be one of the most important things we could possibly do as a society. For interested readers, [there is an archive of his work here](#). Those who know me know I love quotes. In his memory and in honor of his work, I found some that resonated with me and posted them here in honor of his important life work.

"Unfortunately, many leaders and even some neighbors think the idea of a strong local community is something that's sort of "nice," a luxury if you have the spare time, but not really important, vital, or necessary. However, we know from our work in communities around the globe that strong communities are vital, productive, and important. And above all, they are necessary because of the inherent limits of all institutions."

"I knew from being a neighborhood organizer that you could never change people or neighborhoods with the basic proposition that what we need to do is fix them," he said. "What made for change was communities that believed they had capacities, skills, abilities and could create power when they came together in a community."

"Here is the rub: Systems that are constructed for order cannot provide satisfaction in domains that require a unique and personal human solution. They are unable to provide the satisfaction that they promise because of their very nature. This is not a critique of any individual's leadership or method of operation. It is that systems have a limit; by their nature, they cannot provide prosperity or peace of mind or a life of satisfaction."

"Systems use relationships to produce products and services. Associations create relationships for their own sake. This has the effect of bringing forth the properties of kindness, generosity, and the rest."

"People who call us servants are always fixing us, but friends don't always try to fix us."

"I've never seen a low-income neighborhood that really changed because they finally got enough health, human service, religious or government agencies fixing them. That doesn't work. It may make life more tolerable for individuals, but it doesn't change communities."

"No matter how hard they try, our very best institutions cannot do many things that only we can do. And the things that only we can do as a family and a neighborhood are vital to a decent, good, satisfied life."

"We are often reduced as families to being responsible for paying others to teach, watch, and know our children, and to transport them to their paid child raisers. Our villages have often become useless— our neighbors responsible for neither their children nor ours. As a result, everywhere we talk about the local "youth problem." There is no "youth problem." There is a neighborhood problem: adults who have forgone their responsibility and capacity to join their neighbors in sharing the wealth of children. It is our greatest challenge and our most hopeful possibility."

"One argument for diversity is that it ensures participation and creates the power of being heard. It is expressed by the popular maxim, "Nothing about us without us." Implicit in this idea is that those outside must come inside in order to ensure that their self-interest is served. There is another way of understanding the value of diversity. It does not focus on the importance of the outsiders gaining equal participation. Instead it focuses upon the benefit the outsider brings to the group. It recognizes that, in welcoming the stranger, the group becomes more powerful by adding the outsider's capacity."

"If you attend the meetings of many neighborhood organizations, their focus is mainly on local issues. These often include unruly youth, dangerous alleys, graffiti, lack of jobs, dangerous police, drug sales, belligerent local merchants, the incompetent teachers in the school, lack of space for a community garden, unreasonably high city fines and the unresponsiveness of city officials, etc. After identifying the issues, the deliberation that follows centers on who's to blame for each issue and what can be done about changing them. Typically, the blame falls on police, youth workers, teachers, merchants, local officials, landlords, etc. As a result, the groups' action requires them to have enough power to influence or change the practices of blame worthy local institutions and professionals. There is an alternative path. It is pursued by some neighborhood groups that identify issues but they don't then ask, "Who's to blame?" Instead, their first question is, "As organized residents on this block, what do we have to do with these issues? What are the issues that we can deal with using our own capacities and resources?"

"There is a reason that trust is generated associationally rather than institutionally. Institutions are groups of people held together by money. Trust is not required. For example, universities are institutions often described "communities of scholars." However, the day a university stops paying the scholar that community will disappear. Associations, on the other hand, are groups of people who are not paid. They are held together by trust, the glue that holds society together. Within society, associational life is the primary trust builder because of its three practices that manifest a trustworthy society."

"We hear that Americans are polarized. Nationally, there is not of enough trust to bridge the national chasm. Yet in our small towns and neighborhoods, it is often difficult to find strong community wide divisive polarity. Instead there is usually a nearly invisible trustfulness that allows the residents to collectively do the necessary work of producing community well-being."

As I read through tributes and thought about this humble leader and his important life's work, it is apparent that he filled all he met with a sense of hope and purpose. He held the wisdom that the true wealth of our society is held within authentic communities. Supporting our inherent talents and resources as a society would lead to the realization of our greatest treasure, shared connection based on the value of our collective talents, and resources, shared with each other under the premise that we should not provide services to community but support the capacity of community to do things in support of each other.

My work has largely focused on the resources and talents of the recovery community and allied groups and their role and function in healing at the individual, family and community levels. I hope he would approve. It is a hard concept for us to embrace in America. We tend to turn everything into a service rather than a collaboration.

One of the primary messages that McKnight focused on was the importance of continually building community with intention. Focusing on expanding on the margins and focusing beyond the challenges we face to create solutions, together. That is what drew me into his work when I was exposed to it.

RIP John L. McKnight, may you continue to inspire and build community through your writings for generations to come.

Sources

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