

Deepening Community: Finding Joy Together in Chaotic Times

by Paul Born

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SUMMARY

DEEPENING COMMUNITY IS PAUL BORN'S FOURTH BOOK AND HIS MOST PERSONAL reflection to date on people, relationships, and what constitutes community in today's "chaotic" society.

BORN, THE CO-FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF TAMARACK: AN INSTITUTE FOR Community Engagement, has a long history of leading community-development and community-building projects and is deeply engaged in this work on a personal and professional level. Best known for his anti-poverty work at the Community Opportunities Development Association and Opportunities 2000 in Waterloo Region and through Tamarack's involvement in the Vibrant Communities project, he was recognized in 2013 as a Senior Ashoka Fellow for his "significant contribution as an influencer and thought leader in the economic development sector."

In Born's best-selling first book, *Community Conversations* (originally published in 2008, a second edition was revised and updated in 2012), he described methods for community engagement based on the art of facilitating conversations to ensure that people in communities were directly involved in determining and influencing their own futures. *Community Conversations* arose directly from Born's experience at Tamarack and with Vibrant Communities and suggests 10 specific techniques that can be used by those engaged in community-building efforts.

As editor of *Creating Vibrant Communities* (2008), Born organized a broad cast of contributors to tell the story of 10 communities in Canada and how they embraced the Vibrant Communities approach conceived originally by Sherri Torjman of the Caledon Institute. Subtitled *How Individuals and Organizations from Diverse Sectors of Society Are Coming Together to Reduce Poverty in Canada*, the book illustrates dramatically the potential of the community conversations that Born advocates.

For Leaderful Communities: A Study in Community Leadership (2008), Born conducted research to better understand the nature of community leadership, how leaders can lead other leaders, and to come up with a model of community leadership that could engage people collectively and collaboratively. He found that community leadership would thrive if people could develop a shared sense of community, purpose, and values, and he used this knowledge to create a community leadership model to support Opportunities 2000, an anti-poverty initiative in Waterloo Region, Ontario.

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Deepening Community is a logical extension of these three previous books and moves the conversation forward to address much more personal aspects of our relationship with communities. In his preface, Born explains, “I have written *Deepening Community* to empower all of us to open up to community, to make conscious choices about the kind of community we desire, and to feel more connected to the people we care about.” The book explores what Born calls “four acts of community life”:

- sharing our stories,
- taking time to enjoy one another,
- taking care of one another, and
- working together for a better world.

Each of these chapters is bolstered by three types of community stories. The first are Born’s personal recollections of the Mennonite community of refugees that he grew up in and which influenced his thinking and character. The second are stories based on his experiences over three decades of community building and economic development work. The third are stories that other personal and professional friends have shared with him over the years.

While the term “community” is used quite frequently in our society, as Peter Block explains in a foreword, this is often without any depth or substance. Block suggests that while there are many factors that lead to alienation and isolation, chief among them is the fast pace of life today, a focus on competition and financial acquisition, and increasing use of technology, which, while seeming to connect us, actually reduces the quality and value of our interactions. Since many different meanings can be ascribed to “community,” Born defines his understanding of community in terms of five broad categories:

- community as identity,
- community as place,
- community as spiritual,
- community as intentional, and
- community as a natural living system.

To set up his concept of deep community, Born then characterizes our ways of interacting with each other in terms of three hypothetical “options” (which sound eerily familiar): Shallow Community, Fear-Based Community, and Deep Community. By exploring these alternatives through his own experiences, Born juxtaposes the options to explain the value of deepening community. He then describes in detail how the four acts of community building can be used to create new possibilities for more satisfying and positive community. The bottom line for Paul Born is that in today’s world we can make choices that will truly make a difference.

This book, as with Paul Born’s other publications, is anchored in research. Much of the content is informed by a detailed survey of 500 of the most active members of Tamarack’s communities to find out about their definition and sense of community, and their ideas about how community conversations and relationships can be enhanced. And not surprisingly, Born intends these conversations to continue and has set up a website

(www.deepeningcommunity.org) to facilitate and encourage broad participation. Reading a book by Paul Born is always a bit like receiving an invitation to join something new and exciting.

Paul Born has said that he doesn't consider himself to be a writer but rather an activist and storyteller who writes to share his experience with others. Fortunately for us, that experience is quite extraordinary. And because he is well-connected, with a huge and active network of personal and professional colleagues and friends, his conversations embrace many of the leading thinkers in community-building, social innovation, systems change, and leadership. While Born's reflections are revealing and deeply personal, his thinking is very much informed and enhanced by the ideas and work of others, and he is a master of continuous conversations and learning.

It is also not surprising that Paul Born and Tamarack have becoming deeply engaged in the Collective Impact "movement," acting in partnership with FSG and the Aspen Institute to help people learn how to use the framework to address complex and large-scale social problems. Born recognized in Collective Impact the same kind of approach and collaboration that he and his colleagues had pioneered in Vibrant Communities, and the work of Kania and Kramer on Collective Impact had great resonance for him. If you are interested in Collective Impact, you will know that an important condition of the approach is engaging diverse multi-sectoral partners in a common agenda and ensuring continuous communication and reflection. If you want to know more about understanding your own capacity to engage in such deep collaboration and ways to engage community members more fully in the conversation, then you will find considerable guidance and fresh ideas in *Deepening Community*.