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The Art of Belonging

It's a great pleasure to be back in Newcastle for the Hunter Research Foundation. I'm sure that you, like me, are pretty tired of being told how selfish we all are - how it's in our very nature to be selfish, as though that is the defining characteristic of human beings: they are driven by self-interest. Even when we do something that appears to be altruistic, the theory goes, it's not really altruistic: we are just doing that to make ourselves feel good or to appear so in the eyes of other people.

Some biologists have been telling us that evolution has decreed that we are to be so ruthlessly competitive, so intent on looking out for Number One, that if anyone stands in our way we will act aggressively towards them, even violently, if that's what it takes to get our own way.

Is that you? Let me invite you to look in the mental mirror for a moment and reflect on all that and ask yourselves if that seems like a fair description of you. I'm sure, if you're going to be absolutely honest, you will say "yes, there's a bit of that in me - I admit that occasionally I'm just desperate to get my own way and sometimes I do feel as if I'm pretty strongly driven by self-interest". Sometimes it does seem, when we look around the community or the nation or the world, as if our essential nature, the deepest truth about us, is that we are selfish creatures.

I have some good news that I want to share with you tonight, and it's the main theme of my new book, *The Art of Belonging*. The good news is that there is a deeper truth about us than that; a sweeter, nobler truth. Ruthless individualists, sometimes; yes. But the deeper truth is that we are social beings by nature, more inclined to cooperate than compete. The evidence for that proposition can be found at the cutting edge of neuroscience, evolutionary biology and social psychology, but you don't have to consult the scientific evidence - you need only look around you! Think for a moment how hopeless we humans are at surviving in isolation. Yes, there are hermits, there are people who do get away from it all and just live on their own, perhaps with a dog, and don't engage with the community at all - but they are absolute rarities. Look at how most of us choose to live - in cities, in suburbs, towns and villages - because we know we can't survive without communities: they support, sustain, protect and nurture us. No wonder it's in our nature to create them; no wonder the urge to belong is so powerful within us.



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But communities don't just happen and they don't always survive. In the history of the human race, the history of Australia, even the relatively modern history of Australia, communities sometimes fizzle out, they sometimes splinter and fragment, they sometimes lose that sense of *being* a community. And that points to what I think of as the beautiful symmetry of human nature: we need communities and they need us. As human beings, as social creatures, we can't survive without each other - that's why we are, by nature, community dwellers. But those communities won't survive unless we, in turn, engage with them, nurture and support them.

But self-interest does always lurk - I don't want to paint too rosy a picture. We have this ever-present tension within us: the tension between our sense of independence and our sense of inter-dependence; the feeling that my own unique, individual, personal identity *really* matters to me and the realisation that my personal identity can't be separated from my social identity: I am part of a family, an organisation, a friendship circle, a neighbourhood. That tension between the personal and the social, between our sense of independence and inter-dependence, helps to explain a great deal of the confusion and uncertainty that many of us experience.

We know that a civil society can only function if we cooperate with each other. We know it will only function if we participate in it and keep in personal touch with the people who share our neighbourhood or our other communities. Yet, at the same time, we sometimes just want to have our own way, even if it's not in the best interests of other people.

Unless you've been in a coma, sometime in the last few weeks you will have caught at least a glimpse of a football final in one code or another. Team sports often evoke a visceral response in us, and there are good reasons for that: most team sports are modern symbolic expressions of ancient and primitive urges - the urge to hunt and to protect our territory. However, there is something even more significant about team sports: they are an object lesson in how we must balance our personal and social identities by learning to cooperate before we can begin to compete. Children must learn this at an early age (though some are quicker to catch on than others): we must set aside our dreams of personal glory for the greater good of the team. (We must pass that ball!) The team is a kind of microcosm of society, where the same thing applies: ultimately, we can only be successful if we first learn to cooperate.

So that's our deepest evolutionary imperative: to create communities that will protect and nurture and sustain us and make us feel not just physically safe but emotionally secure as well. In fact, if we neglect the local neighbourhood - the place where we share common ground with other people - if the community we live in doesn't really matter to us, we will put at risk not only our sense of safety and emotional security but possibly our mental health as well. The more we look into what sustains mental health, the more we realise the importance of



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being part of a stable community, being in a safe place where we feel as if we belong, a place where people keep an eye on each other and care about each other's wellbeing.

Our deep, intuitive understanding of that is what drives a very fashionable fantasy in modern urban Australia: the fantasy of the village. Notice how that word “village” crops up everywhere? You wouldn't dream of creating a housing development for people in retirement and calling it anything but a retirement village, as though the word “village” is so attractive and warm, it might take the edge off the reality of what's happening to you. High-rise apartment blocks are now being called “vertical villages” - again, perhaps, to disguise what is really happening. Even the most sterile regional shopping mall is likely to have a little area set aside for a clock, a fountain, a potted plant and a few seats that will be called the “village square” or something similar. Many local suburban shopping centres are now calling themselves “the village”, and you can understand why: because we recognise that it's getting harder to live as if we're members of a fully functioning community in urban Australia, we cling to the village fantasy.

We sometimes imagine that life would be richer, simpler and more “authentic” if we actually moved to a rural village - a place where I could “be myself”; feel safe and secure; where the neighbours would all be friendly and supportive but also respectful of my privacy (there would be no gossip, of course). There would be a creek where the kids could catch tadpoles and race billycarts up and down the main street (there'd be no traffic); they'd never be hunched over a screen in a dark room; they'd always be out kicking footballs and climbing trees. Such fantasies don't usually incorporate things like drought or grasshopper plagues, or snakes, or the fact that there's a greater incidence of mental illness in rural Australia than in urban Australia, or that respiratory disease is more common in the bush than in urban settings. In truth, of course, those kinds of villages are dying out, all over Australia, for all sorts of commercial and social and cultural reasons.

But the good news is that the life of the village, as we so fondly imagine it, can be achieved anywhere, even in the most unlikely-looking suburban area or higher-density urban settings. We can make it feel like a village, we can make it work like a village ... as the sub-title of my new book says: it's not where you live, it's how you live.

I remember conducting some research some years ago on why people live where they live. (It is surprising how often it seems to be accidental, by the way, a bit like how you come to be married to the person you're married to, or how you come to be doing the job you're doing.) In this particular study, I vividly remember talking to a group of young mothers in the Sydney suburb of Mascot, right on the perimeter of Sydney Airport. There they were, with the flight path overhead, aircraft thundering in and out all day and half the night, and those women were saying, “Why would anyone ever want to live anywhere but Mascot? Imagine wanting to live in the Eastern suburbs!” What they were saying, of course, that in this rather unlikely-looking place, they had managed to create a village life for themselves. In that highly



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urbanised setting, surrounded by light industry, they had forged strong connections with their neighbours (mainly via their children). It was a functioning neighbourhood, where people understood what “neighbour” meant. In many parts of Newcastle, many parts of Australia, the same thing is being achieved.

But notice, as we move into the 21st century, it’s getting harder and harder to achieve because our society is changing in so many ways that work against the maintenance of stable and cohesive neighbourhoods. We’ve all lived through these changes so I don’t need to dwell on them, but perhaps simply remind you of some of the main factors that have been reshaping the Australian way of life.

For example, our changing patterns of marriage and divorce. We used to say proudly that stable marriages create a stable society but you wouldn’t want to say that today. You could have said that of us 40 years ago, when only seven or eight per cent of marriages ever ended in divorce, but not today, when the Institute of Family Studies tells us that around 35 per cent of contemporary marriages are likely to end in divorce. This is a major source of social instability - not just for the couples who divorce but for their extended families, for their friendship circles, for their local neighbourhoods. That sustained high level of divorce is clearly one of the factors making communities less stable.

Of course, when children are involved, as they often are, the problem is somewhat greater. So we have the situation in Australia today where one million dependent kids live with just one of their natural parents and half of them, half a million kids, migrate regularly - weekly or fortnightly - from the home of the custodial parent to the home of the non-custodial parent for access visits. Many families manage that brilliantly, though it’s often traumatic in the early years, but you can see how the mass migration of half a million kids, happening regularly like that, affects communities. They’re not just moving from one house to another, but also from one neighbourhood to another, with all the disruptions that implies.

While we’re talking about children, let’s acknowledge another factor that is changing the character of neighbourhoods: our low birthrate. People are talking about mini baby-boom at the moment, because the birth rate in the last few years has staggered up from 1.7 to 1.8 babies per woman. You can call that a mini baby-boom if you like, as long as you shout ‘mini’ and whisper ‘boom’ - after all, the replacement birthrate is 2.1 babies per woman, so we’re well below that. We know what an actual baby-boom looks like, because we had one in the 15 years after the end of World War II, when the birth rate hit 3.6 babies per woman.

Children, as we know, tend to act as a social lubricant. The kids get to know each other and then the families get to know each other. When we’re producing the smallest generation of children we’ve ever produced, relative to total population, obviously that social lubricant is in shorter supply than it once was. We look for ways to compensate for that and a favourite solution is to get a dog. As the birth rate has gone down, pet ownership has gone up and



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many people are quite explicit in admitting their dog is a child substitute, which is why they tend to give their dogs human names. (When you meet your dog-owning neighbours at the dog-walking park, that creates a problem of remembering whether Wendy is the dog or the owner.)

Other social changes are also working against stable and cohesive neighbourhoods. The rise of the two-income household has occurred in response to the emerging middle-class conviction that you need two incomes to sustain the way of life you want. As a result, both adults in a household - with or without children - are likely to be working in paid employment. So we're working harder, we're busier, we're more tired, we're reporting higher levels of stress than previously, and there's less time and energy for connections with the local neighbourhood than there once was.

Our shrinking households are another factor, increasing the risk of social isolation for more Australian than ever before. The largest single category of household type in Australia, and it's also the fastest growing category, is the single-person household, now accounting now for about 27 per cent of all households. (The Bureau of Statistics predicts that by about 2026, almost one household in three will be a single-person household.) There are many, many reasons why people live alone, and many different responses to the experience: some people love it, some hate it, some people have chosen it, some have been involuntarily forced into it. Many people move in and out of solo living, at various phases of the life-cycle. However, this trend creates a greater risk of loneliness, with attendant feelings of exclusion and even alienation ... and a consequently greater responsibility on the other people in the street to make sure that the people who live alone are not neglected.

There are a couple of other obvious factors contributing to the loss of stability and cohesiveness in our local neighbourhoods. We are a more mobile population - just like Americans, Australians move house on average once every six years. If you've been living in the same house for 30 years, imagine how many times other people must move to get the national average up to once every six years. (I was recently talking to another audience about this, and one woman said, "Most of the people moving into our street are renters and we know they're all on a 12-month lease, so do you think it's worth getting to know them?" I hope you can guess what my answer was: of course it's worth getting to know them - they're part of the neighbourhood for as long as they're there.)

Universal car ownership has reduced footpath traffic in most local neighbourhoods. You wave at a car and assume your neighbour is in it, but you don't necessarily make eye contact, and you may not make eye contact for weeks at a stretch.

Put all this together and you can see why so many people in our major cities say "I don't know my neighbours" or "I feel like a stranger in my own street". No one says that with pleasure or pride, by the way.



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Add to all that the impact of the information technology revolution, which has made it easier for us to feel as if we're connected without actually making the contact that was once thought necessary for human communication, namely face-to-face. It's very clever, it's very convenient, it's constantly stimulating - some of us have even concluded that we prefer it to the company of other people: we are blurring the distinction traditionally made between data transfer and human communication.

All these factors are pretty obviously moving us in one particular direction - away from the sense that we are part of the neighbourhood, the local community. The implication of that is, of course, that if we still believe in the idea of a community, in the idea of belonging; if we want to live somewhere where we feel physically safe and emotionally secure, then we will obviously have to work harder at it than our parents and grandparents did. Just like every other human relationship, our relationship with the community won't survive unless we put in the necessary work. If you want the kind of society you aspire to belong to, this is where it starts - in your own street.

What makes a community function well? Many things contribute towards to it. Urban planning plays a big part: we need to become more imaginative in designing the kinds of spaces - the community hubs - where people will accidentally meet each other, which is an important part of what makes a community function. Places like libraries, churches, schools, cafes, pubs, shopping centres, parks ... all these places can act like hubs that bring us together for social interaction, and social interaction is how we build the social capital that makes us strong.

But the key factor, always, is our own determination to act like neighbours, to recognise that the neighbourhood will function like a community only if we are prepared to do the things that neighbours do - which is not very grand, by the way. Neighbours don't have to be best friends, or intimates, but part of what you do when you're a neighbour is simply to make a point of establishing eye contact and saying hello when you pass in the street or meet at the shops; you wave, you smile, you pass the time of day, and you look out for each other. It's this level of mutual respect and concern that creates social capital.

I want to wrap this up by reading a brief story from the new book. *The Art of Belonging* is a work of non-fiction, but the social analysis is illustrated by a series of stories from the life of a fictional suburb I've called Southwood. Here's one:

'Kendall Street had been a close community in the 1970s, full of families with young children. As the children grew up and moved elsewhere some of the residents sold the family home and moved to apartments or smaller houses closer to the city. Some moved interstate to be closer to grandchildren, others stayed to watch a new generation of families arrive and begin the cycle all over again.'



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When a young Vietnamese couple, Jason Ng and his heavily pregnant wife Victoria, moved into Number Eight their next-door neighbours on both sides welcomed them but Victoria and Jason were both working and did not have much time to connect with other people in the street before their baby was born. They'd both come to Australia as students and then been granted permanent residency so they had no family in Australia.

When their baby died in his cot, aged three months, the young couple felt their world had collapsed. They were devastated by shock and grief. They called their parents in Vietnam and both mothers agreed to come out, though it would take a little time to organise.

The appearance of the ambulance had triggered an immediate response in Kendall Street. The next-door neighbours had insisted on bringing Victoria and Jason into their homes for a cup of tea and something to eat. Those neighbours in turn were followed by others in the street enquiring what had happened. Over the following days, a steady stream of local people came to the house to introduce themselves and offer support - one did some shopping, one mowed the lawn, and several people prepared simple meals and dropped them in ready for heating.

At first Victoria and Jason, inconsolable, didn't know whether they wanted to be left alone or embraced by these kindly strangers. But the trickle of visitors came anyway. No-one stayed for long but people felt it was important to make sure everything possible was being done for the grief-stricken couple.

When it was decided that a service would be held at the funeral director's chapel, the street turned out and packed the place out. Weeks passed, waves of grief still engulfed the young couple without warning but they gradually embraced the idea that life could go on, must go on. They were comforted by the kindness of their neighbours and when the two mothers finally arrived they met several of the families in Kendall Street and were assured that Victoria and Jason would never feel alone or neglected here.'

Well, that's a sad story but what's sad about it, apart from the content, is that it so often takes a crisis or a disaster to bring us together – a flood, a fire, a death, an accident, a storm. When these things happen to us, we don't hesitate to act like neighbours. How much better it would be if we were nurturing the life of our local communities, our suburbs, our streets, our neighbourhoods without needing the trigger of a disaster.

One of my psychological heroes, Carl Rogers, the American psychotherapist, said towards the end of his life that when his patients came to a full understanding of who they were, it was always to realise that they were not individuals, but members of families, friendship circles and other networks and communities. In other words, it was to realise that our sense of personal identity depends on our sense of social identity. As I say in the book: "You don't really know who you are until you know where you belong." Some of us are obsessed by that question: "Who am I?" Well, if you could ever find the answer to that question, I can guarantee it wouldn't be very interesting: the main thing you would find is that you are like



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the rest of us. So the really important questions are: “Who are we?” and “What kind of society do we want to become?”

Question time

Dr Brent Jenkins: Tonight’s panel discussion will focus on young people and the transition from school to work. We hear today that ‘friends are the new family’. Within the context of the panel theme, what are the issues around friendship and will they work for or against us?

Hugh: It’s parents who often say ‘friends are the new family’ when they’re looking at their offspring. And they’re right. This is a very interesting generation of young Australians we are looking at today - I mean people in their late teens through early 20s, particularly the group we are about to focus on in our panel discussion in a moment. They are the offspring of our most-divorced generation of parents. They are the generation who watched the impact of the deep recession of the early 90s on their parents. It was their parents’ generation who suffered the highest level of unemployment in Australia since the Great Depression. And it is this generation of young people who have also grown up with very sophisticated information technology that is constantly changing. Their *world* is constantly changing. Change is the air they breathe.

Growing up in a very unpredictable, unstable world has taught them to keep their options open, to hang loose, to wait and see: that is their generational characteristic. Their generational question is: “What else is there?” whether they happen to be talking about a sexual partner, a musical genre, a political philosophy or a job. “This is fine,” they may say, “but what else is there?” The other thing that life has taught them, through these formative years, is that they need each other and I think the sense of tribalism - the strong communitarian impulse in this emerging generation - is one of the most heartening things about them. The level of emotional support they give each other – it’s the hugging generation, you will have noticed – is like the level of emotional support that, in previous generations, we might have expected to receive from the extended family.

But, as I have been suggesting tonight, the extended family is now more fragmented and less stable so this generation of young people know that the *most* precious resource they have for coping with life in an uncertain and unstable world is not technology, not even education, but each other.