***The Abundant Community***

**A Summary by Sara Boatman**

John McKnight and Peter Block have written *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco, 2010). Both are accomplished scholars who have created a volume in three highly readable sections. The first section describes our shift from what they call a “citizen society” (based on connections of families and neighborhoods) to a “consumer society” (based on the notion that satisfaction is purchased). They argue that we must once again become citizens rather than consumers if we want to create and produce our future. They believe passionately that strong local communities are a necessity. They state their belief that the responsibilities of an abundant community are *health, safety, environment, economy, food, children and care*, and that no business, agency or government can fulfill these seven community functional responsibilities; only citizens can.

The authors explain that consumer society began when what was once handled by the family or the community went instead to the marketplace (consider changes in the delivery of education, elder care, or safety as examples). These consumer-driven systems, while providing many services, cannot provide truly personal responses for every individual, and it is difficult for them to provide real satisfaction. They conclude that consumerism has become a cultural as well as an economic system. They critique this system and identify three “rules” that serve as core beliefs of the consumer society: *(1) the good life is achieved through our purchasing power; we define success through production and consumption; (2) we must create and spend time working and living in large systems to acquire purchasing power; (3) these large systems define who we are—we increasingly spend more time working, our entertainment is all purchased, and as a result we rotate between being an employee, a consumer and a spectator.* They argue that without the connections and openness of competent families, neighborhoods and communities these systems are diminished because they can’t replace the qualities of families and communities. Real satisfaction, they stress, is only collective satisfaction. They believe that “the price we pay for living in a consumer world, for becoming consumers rather than citizens, is living a dissatisfied life, an incomplete life” (p. 62).

Section two is entitled “Choosing a Satisfied Life.” It begins with a description of what the authors consider to be the abundant community. They believe that the abundant community isn’t organized like a predictable system but rather is created through the relationships of its citizens, based on capacities of *kindness, generosity, cooperation, forgiveness, acceptance of fallibility and mystery.* They suggest several tenets of abundance, which include *what we have is enough; we have the capacity to provide what we need in the face of the human condition; we organize our world in a context of cooperation and satisfaction; we are responsible for each other; we live with the reality of the human condition.* They suggest that a competent community focuses on the gifts of its members, nurtures its associational life and welcomes strangers. Community competence depends on sharing.

Based on their observations of what they consider to be abundant communities the authors have concluded that they have as their basis culture, and three cultural traits that are especially important are *time*, treating it as if there is plenty, and taking time for what is important; *silence:* making time for silence and reflection, thinking and listening to others; *storytelling:* sharing stories about gifts, kindness, generosity or forgiveness gives meaning to the community’s story. The authors challenge readers to examine their community’s citizen economy, which is defined by its policies that support an abundant community and those that do not and should be altered; and its programs and processes that support the abundant community.

Part three is entitled “Creating Abundance” and is filled with examples that invite the reader to consider transformative opportunities for one’s own family, neighborhood or community that help to challenge the habits of exclusive consumerism and instead find and nurture the capacities of abundance. They state “what is needed is for us to more fully engage as citizens and to shift our attention, our narrative, toward the community way that we can reclaim” (p. 116). This section highlights associations, which these authors believe are the workhorses of communities. They write that *“community* means ‘people in relationship*.*’ *Association* means ‘people in powerful relationship.’ A competent community finds its own way through ever-increasing connections between people who exercise their right of freedom of association in order to create a better future together” (p. 131). This section ends with a discussion of the role of *connectors* in creating an abundant community, and includes suggestions for strengthening the connector role. Finally, a powerful example is presented of the evolution of an abundant community, created from stories of several neighborhoods from around the world.

The book also includes a list of organizations and individuals that are creating abundant communities, including their own website, <http://www.abundantcommunity.com> as well as a list of excellent references on community. David Mathews, President of the Kettering Foundation, says of *The Abundant Community,* “this book challenges the conventional wisdom about what you and I can do as citizens to shape our future. McKnight and Block offer concrete examples of what citizens can do and have done by drawing on resources in their families and communities.”