

**A PROVEN WAY
COMMUNITIES CAN SPREAD CHANGE
AND MAKE HOPE REAL FOR ALL**

UNLEASHED

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INTRODUCTION

My family often jokes that on vacations the first thing I do when we visit a new place is to make a beeline for the local public library. If not there, a local diner. Either way, I find someone I can ask endless questions about the community. In my work over the past 30 years, it seems that nearly every week I was on the road going to a different place across the country. I have engaged with just about every type of community you can imagine. These communities have reflected the rich and abundant diversity of our nation. They have faced every conceivable challenge; perhaps the most heartbreaking one I was called to was in Newtown, Connecticut, after the horrific massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School. I write about nine of these communities in this book.

One reason that I wrote this book is because so many communities face so many troubling fault lines that demand our attention. I have made these fault lines the intense focus of my own efforts over the years. To me, this is more than a job. It is a calling to repair breaches in society and enable all people to fulfill their human potential and to take part in America's promise.

THE FAULT LINES WE FACE

The fault lines we face are legion. They include long-term economic decline, racial division and racism, persistent poverty, lack of educational opportunity, civic and political mistrust, and a loss of faith in organizations and leaders. These and other challenges conspire against people, frustrating them and entangling them in hardship, driving and shaping their destinies, and sadly, slowly wringing out their hope.

When I go to communities, it's common for me to hear people lamenting the growing divide between the haves and the have-nots; growing divisions between people who may live in vibrant, gentrifying center cities and those who have been pushed out and pushed aside; growing tensions between old-timers and newcomers; growing worries about losing young people who often feel abandoned and believe they must leave their hometowns to have any chance at a brighter future; growing arguments over whose religious beliefs should prevail; and growing worries about political polarization.

There are communities that are stuck in time, anxiously looking back to reclaim some bygone era, which often wasn't all that good to begin with for many people. In the meantime, other communities move forward and thrive. But why do some communities move ahead while others remain stuck?

There are Brown, Black, and Indigenous people, in particular, who feel the scourge of discrimination, racism, and systemic injustice. They work tirelessly to make good lives for themselves, their families, and their communities. Yet the odds against them keep piling up and the challenges keep piling on.

There are people whose lives have been wracked by upended local economies and opioid and meth crises, and decimated communities who feel abandoned, left behind, deemed inadequate, inept,

and ignorant by others. Will they be further denigrated and be sold more false promises?

Across the United States, far too many people feel that they must make it on their own, all alone. They are not looking for a handout, but rather just a hand up so they can create lives that reflect their deepest aspirations and create communities they want to live in and take pride in.

Such fault lines are only worsening at the time that I write this introduction. Four simultaneous crises have struck Americans hard. There is the public health crisis of COVID-19, which has wreaked havoc on people and the nation as a whole. This crisis has brought these fault lines into much sharper relief, with the damaging effects and lack of adequate responses disproportionately striking communities of color and low-income people. There is the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic, further delineating and worsening preexisting fault lines. There is the crisis of systemic racism and social injustice, which existed before the founding of the nation but has been newly crystallized for many Americans by the murder of George Floyd, among others, and the mass protests that followed. There is a political crisis, which has been taking shape for decades as current events give rise to more and louder grievances, divisions, recriminations, mistrust, and lost faith.

HOW WE DO THE WORK MATTERS

I often say that how we do our work is as important as what we do. Certainly, what we do is critical. But how we do things is absolutely essential to how we address these fault lines and other societal problems. The problem is that so many of the ways in which we go about our work in communities undermines our ability to take effective action. Far too many community efforts overpromise and

underdeliver, thus deepening people's sense of frustration, even cynicism, and leading to further loss of hope. Comprehensive plans are created that are too big for a community to take on and fail to realistically take into account the capacities and real needs of a community.

There are strategies that are imposed on communities from the outside and that lack the kind of critical context I glean even from my informal conversations with people at the local public library or at the diner. Such well-intentioned but misguided efforts undermine people's sense of local ownership and pride. What's more, there are large sums of money sometimes spent long before anyone has a clear view of where investments are most needed and what it takes for those investments to succeed.

Over and over again, there is an unspoken assumption playing out in communities. The idea, in short, is that you can "fix" a community and its problems as if people and their communities were somehow "broken" and needed to be fixed, as if wicked problems of racism and poverty and other tough issues can somehow be easily solved. But neither a community nor its people can be "fixed," especially by those from outside. If we're serious about breaking out of old patterns and engendering real, authentic hope, then we can only work with communities, not act upon them.

In the days and months following the onset of the crises that have been gripping the nation, there has been some good news amid all the hurt and pain and suffering. Individuals, groups, and organizations have banded together in innovative, practical ways to provide education to homebound students having to learn remotely. New partnerships and networks have been created to offer food to the hungry. Cadres of individuals have forged efforts to connect with those who are shut in and isolated and need help getting their prescriptions. These and many other acts of goodwill, kindness, and collective action help to illustrate the innate capacities that exist

within our communities, as do the many actions people and groups have been courageously and painstakingly pursuing in communities each and every day, for years. All of these offer us real hope.

The question is, *How* do we go about more intentionally unleashing the innate potential of people and institutions and groups in communities to address our common challenges and, at the same time, create a civic culture in which people come together to shape their own lives and gain real hope about their future and the future of our society? This book is about answering that question.

THE OPPORTUNITY

There is a golden opportunity before us now to unleash this innate potential. As I noted above, my work has taken me to hundreds, if not thousands, of communities all across the United States; three themes have emerged with increasing clarity and currency from these experiences.

First, so many of our challenges—especially the fault lines I have highlighted—require that we marshal our shared resources if we are to effectively address them. No one leader, no single organization or group, and no individual citizen can tackle these problems alone. These challenges demand a shared response. There must be concerted efforts to bring people and groups together, guided by a sense of common purpose and working in mutually reinforcing ways.

Second, so many Americans deeply yearn to exercise a greater sense of control over their individual and shared lives, and to summon and put into action a sense of personal and collective agency. Americans by nature are doers. Amid the pervasive acrimony and divisiveness gripping our public life and politics today, people want to build things together. People want to be part of something larger

than themselves. As I noted above, during our recent crises, it was possible to catch an inspiring glimpse of this urge to step forward and engage with one another. Now, we must make these actions and behaviors more permanent in our lives.

Third, these times urgently call for us to produce a more just, equitable, fair, and hopeful society. The recent crises we have faced have laid bare long-standing inequities and disparities and injustices in our society. There is a basic need to address these challenges, and this will require us to take different approaches from the past.

So much of this work must happen in local communities. Yes, there are challenges that beg for a national or state response—new laws, regulations, and other important policy solutions. But let's be clear: it is in local communities where people can turn outward toward one another to see and hear each other; where dignity can be afforded to each and every individual; where mind-sets and behaviors affected by biases, preconceived notions, and prejudice must fundamentally shift; where people can work hand in hand and come to recognize each other's innate capacities; where we can marshal those capacities for good; and where we can create a shared responsibility for how we work together.

WHY CIVIC CULTURE IS ESSENTIAL

To achieve these goals, communities must have a strong, robust, and resilient civic culture. I want to underscore the importance of this point. Seeking to address society's fault lines without building civic culture is not possible. Truth be told, the vast majority of the communities I have worked with and studied have weak civic cultures. They are riddled with fragmentation, division, and mistrust. Leaders and organizations are disconnected from their communities. The communities are infused with negative shared narratives.

Promises get made and then broken. Projects start and stall out. Endless public engagement leads to too little progress. Even in those communities with a healthier civic culture, there is a significant need to strengthen them, especially as fault lines grow.

A community's civic culture is made up of such factors as shared norms, leaders at different layers of community, informal spaces for people to gather and work together, networks for civic learning and innovation, a shared sense of purpose, and can-do narratives. These and other factors create an enabling environment that fosters a community's interactions, decision-making, and shared actions. An enabling environment makes room for people to come together to exercise their individual and collective agency and exert greater control over their shared lives.

Communities can actually create a strong civic culture through taking intentional actions. All of the communities that I write about in this book have done so. Your community can, too. The importance of civic culture—the absolute essential need for it—sits at the heart of the story this book tells.

THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE'S FOCUS

Before going on with the rest of this story, perhaps now is a good time to give you a bit of background on my work and that of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation so that you have more context as you read on. I started what has become known as The Harwood Institute in 1988, when I was 27 years old. I had served on 20 political campaigns by the time I was 23 and had worked for two nonprofits. Nonetheless, I was frustrated that so many of the challenges society faced—both the fault lines I have referred to and the troubled civic culture—needed new and different approaches. So my journey began.

Over the next 30 years, my colleagues and I went on to work with communities and groups in all 50 US states, and the institute's approach spread to 40 countries. Everything we've done has been created by working with people and communities. All the innovation produced came out of the necessity to better understand how community and public life work and what it takes to make them work for all people and communities. Over time, we developed a philosophy called "civic faith," which undergirds all we do. In short, civic faith holds that placing people, community, and shared responsibility at the center of our shared lives will lead to a more inclusive, equitable, fair, just, and hopeful society.

In communities like the ones you will read about in the following pages, we teach the institute's practice of "turning outward." When people put this practice to use, their efforts generate and grow civic faith. Turning outward is first and foremost rooted in an orientation—a mind-set, a posture, a stance—of using the community, not your conference room, as your reference point. It also provides applied practices, along with frameworks and tools, for people and groups to make more intentional choices and judgments in order to produce greater impact and relevance in their communities.

To put the institute's philosophy and practice into play, people learn about how to unleash their own potential and the potential of their communities. Over our three decades, we have gained a lot of knowledge and insights about how change unfolds in communities. This book is meant to add significantly to that knowledge base.

In each of the nine communities examined in this book, we introduced at least some portion of the institute's approach. When we engage with communities, we never do the actual work for them. I want to emphasize this point strongly. We are not hired consultants. And we did not assume that role in these nine communities.

In our approach, the work is always done by the people who call the community home; after all, it is their community, not ours.

We teach and coach people about our approach so they can adopt and adapt it for their own use. In the case of these nine communities, we taught it to anywhere from 1 to 5 to more than 150 people. At times, our coaches walked beside people in these communities for 18 months; in some cases, it was for 3 years or more; in other cases, people used our approach with little or no formal relationship with the institute. As you will see, the institute's approach is designed to spread naturally in a community, with more and more individuals and groups making use of it. This helps people continually expand the community's capacity to both address its challenges and shape a more hopeful, inclusive civic culture.

A SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

Over a period of two years, my colleagues and I conducted in-depth examinations of nine communities, each of which The Harwood Institute had worked with at some time during the last 30 years. Our goal was to see what we could learn about how people got started—and why. What did they struggle with? What choices did they make? What context were they operating in, and what ultimately moved them ahead?

Beyond these questions, I wanted to understand the nature of the chain reaction that unfolded once things got started. How do organizations align their actions with the community? And how do the mind-sets, behaviors, and choices of individuals shift over time? In addition, there were questions about the nature of the obstacles these individuals, organizations, and groups faced, and how they overcame them at different stages of their efforts.

We learned that change ripples out in communities through an interaction of highly intentional actions and serendipity. This interaction and its effects can be proactively created. The interactions

themselves cascade through a chain of events, both in real time and over time. While each step has a purpose, exactly where the interaction leads is often unpredictable. The good news is that this chain of events can be catalyzed and nurtured. Through the creation of a critical mass of these interactions and chains of events, a community can actively marshal its collective resources and strengthen its civic culture. And people can restore their belief that they can get things done together.

The stories of the nine communities in this book are truly inspiring. I have come to deeply admire the individuals who stepped forward to make things happen. Against great odds, they often took one step at a time, not knowing exactly what would result, if anything, from their efforts. But they persisted. They created real, tangible progress—and hope.

Following this introduction, you will find the full stories of each of the communities. We have also had an artist graphically depict the unfolding of each story, presented in four separate, corresponding illustrations that represent the story at a different point of time in its development. The next chapter more fully describes characteristics of how and why change was activated in these communities and how it unfolded; these characteristics are also previewed below. This chapter is followed by “How You Can Do It,” which serves as a helpful guide for you to catalyze and grow the kinds of change you read about in the nine stories. Finally, there is the conclusion, “The Story Moving Forward.”

LOOKING AT DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

As you read about these nine communities, you will find that each is a unique place. Each faced its own set of fault lines and challenges. Each has its own history. These places reflect communities

of different sizes, different demographics, and different regions of the United States. Each started in a fundamentally different place. Nonetheless, each story helps us understand what it takes to ignite and spread change.

In Oak Park, Illinois, a relatively well-off community, the public library discovered a growing desire among many residents to tackle underlying issues of inclusion, equity, and poverty. The library realigned its mission and its work with the community and, in turn, sparked ever-growing change throughout the community.

Winchester and Clark County, Kentucky, a small rural community, was on the brink of being left behind. But residents there decided to fight an opioid crisis, embrace children who felt abandoned, and bridge local divides of race, geography, and religion. The actions taken were spearheaded by unexpected people, acting in ways hard to imagine, and creating unpredictable progress by taking just one step at a time. Since the writing of this story, something enormously special has occurred: over 60 organizations and groups have come together to meet twice a week to collectively address systemic issues around COVID-19.

A local United Way in Spokane, Washington, was seeking a new mission and found the community instead. In the process, it helped lead the way to a dramatic transformation of local public education and the ways in which the community marshaled its collective resources to support youth, reduce truancy, and raise the graduation rate, among other efforts. In the meantime, the organization transformed its own focus and became relevant again.

Youngstown, Ohio, was decimated by job loss, corruption, and fragmentation. The community was “waiting for a knight in shining armor” to save it. But residents and local groups started to take small actions in the areas of financial literacy, public education, equity in the arts, neighborhood redevelopment, and others. Each

action built, one upon another, creating new possibilities that rippled out in all directions.

In Red Hook, New York, a small, rural, upstate village, people came together first to change the town's sole stoplight. Before they knew it, this one small action unleashed people's innate capabilities to address long-simmering challenges posed by young people leaving town, a failing economy, and residents who seemed disinclined to work together. A new can-do civic culture has emerged, taken root, and spread.

Las Vegas, Nevada, is known as a sprawling, fun-loving, go-it-alone city. Against all odds, a new civic culture emerged as people recognized that they needed each other and must work together. New shared progress has been made on everything from homelessness, to foster care, to food insecurity, to immigrant empowerment, to the connection of important institutions, such as public media, with the community.

Flint, Michigan, is a city known for suffering devastating blows—from the loss of the automobile industry to the growth of crime, to the poisoning of its water supply. But the people of Flint set out to build connections and take action on racial divisions and racism, downtown rejuvenation, religious divisions, and the use of the arts to lift up marginalized voices. While the challenges for this city persist, the community's resilience continues to grow.

In Mobile, Alabama, after 40 years of defeated school levies and longtime racial, social, and economic divisions, the community found its way back into the public schools. By coming together across its many divisions, it was able to build public will for sustained action on public education, establishing new public accountability for the school district and for the community itself. Mobile transformed not only its public education, but the community's civic fabric as well.

Finally, there is Battle Creek, Michigan. The community was looking for a sign—any sign—that progress was still possible. Six

individuals came together to spark the needed change. It began with the Burmese population, and then ever-expanding change rippled throughout the community on issues of education, youth, diversity, and inclusion, among many others. These actions generated a stronger civic culture and a can-do spirit.

Sometimes, it appears that change just happens in communities spontaneously, inexplicably, or even magically. Other times, we are led to believe that it is wholly orchestrated, that some linear plan has been carefully laid out, engineered, and implemented. Neither is usually the case. These nine stories help us to see and understand that something very different is at play, a dynamic we can help to catalyze, nurture, and grow.

WISHFUL THINKING WON'T WORK

I began by saying that how we do the work is as important as what we do. I spoke about various actions that are taken that actually undermine a community's ability to grow and progress, whether it is imposing solutions from the outside or attempting a one-size-fits-all approach. Far too many efforts fail to take into account the context of a community, people's shared aspirations, and how change unfolds over time.

Over the past 30 years, I have learned that it is essential to meet a community where it is—not where we wish it might be. Wishful thinking does not help to address the real challenges that communities face, such as those in the nine communities I write about in this book. Nor does wishful thinking wash away the mistrust, toxic and acrimonious discourse, out-of-touch leaders and organizations, and misguided solutions.

Communities regain their health and vitality by growing new efforts and renewing their strength over time. These efforts must be

rooted in what matters to people, and these efforts must be largely shaped and created by the people in the community itself. Short-term wins must be coupled with longer-term gains. People need to see progress being made along the way if they are to engage for the long haul—especially if they are to believe that they can come together to get things done.

As I noted—but it is worth repeating here—the seedbed for this growth is the development of strong, positive underlying community conditions—*a civic culture*. These are the conditions you can see take shape and grow across the nine stories of communities in this book. When these conditions exist, or begin to emerge, a community can accelerate and deepen its progress. The result is that the issues people care about are addressed while new, underlying community conditions that enable change take root, grow, and spread.

Let me be clear about terminology. The idea of “community” here is not meant to suggest a monolithic entity—something that moves in unison or acts as a single unit. Rather, communities are natural, organic systems made up of people, organizations, networks, norms, and other elements, all interacting with one another. They can be shaped but never controlled. Think ecosystem, not erector set.

WHAT UNLEASHES A COMMUNITY’S POTENTIAL

It is in this broader context that I want to outline 10 characteristics of how change happens that were uncovered through our research and analysis of these nine communities.

One: *A chaotic or unpredictable chain of events is driven by people making a series of intentional choices.* At each juncture in the chain of events, whether you are looking at Flint or little Red Hook, someone, or more often, some group, made intentional choices about where and why to begin their efforts and what to do next.

Two: *The chain of events hinges on a reframing of what matters to people in the community.* In Oak Park, for instance, it was when local residents became engaged in renaming and reframing the challenges facing the community, in particular by articulating their shared aspirations for the kind of community they sought to create. This pivotal turning point can be seen in each and every one of the nine communities we examined.

Three: *The reframing sparks a different notion of what needs to be addressed, how, and by whom.* Look at Winchester and Clark County, and you will see the power of this factor. It is reflected, for example, in how people there came together to address the opioid crisis. Another example is how the fractious religious communities joined forces to support young people when the local YMCA was forced to close.

Four: *It doesn't really matter who in the community sparks the chain of events.* Anyone can get things started. In Las Vegas, it was KNPR, the regional public media station. In Youngstown, it was a young mayor and the local public library. In Battle Creek, it was six individuals who came together to form an ad hoc group. The chain of events unleashed and sustained in a community is not dictated by the entity that sparks the effort. Anyone, any group, can get things going.

Five: *The precipitating cause for people taking action is always different—and is simply a point of departure.* Look across the nine communities, and the initial reason for someone or some group or organization to start moving forward is different. In each case, it was merely a point of departure for a whole host of subsequent chain reactions to occur over time. Just getting started is critical.

Six: *Change spreads as a result of people working through networks—not through the whole community, as if it operated as a single unit.* This is an important characteristic. Too many such efforts seek to move an entire community at once. These efforts are often based

on some theory about how change should happen. But how change actually happens is quite different: it is through people and networks.

Seven: *A small cadre of change agents can catalyze growing and expanding chains of events.* In Flint, for example, there were 15 to 20 individuals who attended the initial class of the Place for Public Ideas (the forerunner of The Harwood Institute’s Public Innovators Lab). While the number of individuals and groups involved in Flint kept expanding over time, it is possible to see how this initial small cadre of individuals helped to spark so much of the change that happened there.

Eight: *There is a profound realignment to “community” among organizations, groups, and individuals engaging in creating the change.* The list of groups that reflect this characteristic in the nine communities we worked with is a long one and includes United Way organizations, cultural institutions, public schools and school districts, coalitions, foundations, government agencies, and many, many others. What they all hold in common is that they radically turned outward toward their communities and realigned their missions, initiatives and programs, organizational structure, staffing—and most of all—their newly discovered catalytic nature in the community.

Nine: *Small changes that people, organizations, and groups produce lead to a major shift in the underlying conditions—the civic culture—of the community.* As I have already noted, a community’s civic culture is made up of a collection of factors, including networks, norms, a shared sense of purpose, a can-do narrative, trusted leaders (at all levels), and boundary-spanning organizations, among others. When you read these nine stories, you will see these different factors emerging, growing, and strengthening—serving to forge a new foundation upon which these communities propel themselves forward.

Ten: *Time and relentless patience are essential factors for communities to move forward.* There was no quick fix, no single program,

no one initiative that created the new trajectory in each of our nine communities. Take any one of them, and you will see that their stories play out over years—some over a decade or two or more. This was a journey for these communities and the people who live there. It demanded time and relentless patience on the part of individuals to keep pushing, persevering, and pressing for progress.

THE WORK WE MUST DO

My own commitment to this journey has only grown over the past three decades. It hasn't always been an easy one or a smooth and direct route. During this time, society has made remarkable progress in many areas, but the hard reality is that so many fault lines that bedevil us have grown. And so many communities suffer from a weak civic culture that makes taking effective action difficult, even seemingly impossible at times. My own belief is that there is much work to be done to find ways in a rapidly changing society to bring out the best in us, to seek to fulfill the promise of the United States, and to make hope real for everyone.

This book is another piece of the institute's larger mission and work. It is about how communities regenerate themselves by coming together and marshaling resources, often in unexpected ways, in unimaginable combinations, and with unpredictable results. It is never possible to know exactly where people's efforts will lead or what ripples they will create, but a community can be proactive about setting the right conditions for this emergence to occur. The fault lines in our society are calling on us to heed these insights. We must restore our belief that we can get things done together. We must find ways for people to fulfill their own potential and for them to shape their community's future.

Even after all these years, my family still jokes with me about

visiting local public libraries and diners on our vacations. But I continue to be inspired by the people I meet and what they share with me. I hear people talk about their communities, what they love about them, what they aspire for them to become, and what stands in the way. The people in these nine communities found ways to create a new dynamic of change—to spark it, help it take root, grow it, and spread it.

I have been on this journey for over 30 years because I believe, as do the people I have met in local communities on my vacations and the people with whom I have worked in communities all across the nation, that we can choose to create a more hopeful, inclusive path forward. My hope is that this book offers a contribution to that vital effort.