



SAFETY IN OUR HANDS

Where and How Police
Work Is Working

Mike Butler and Peter Block



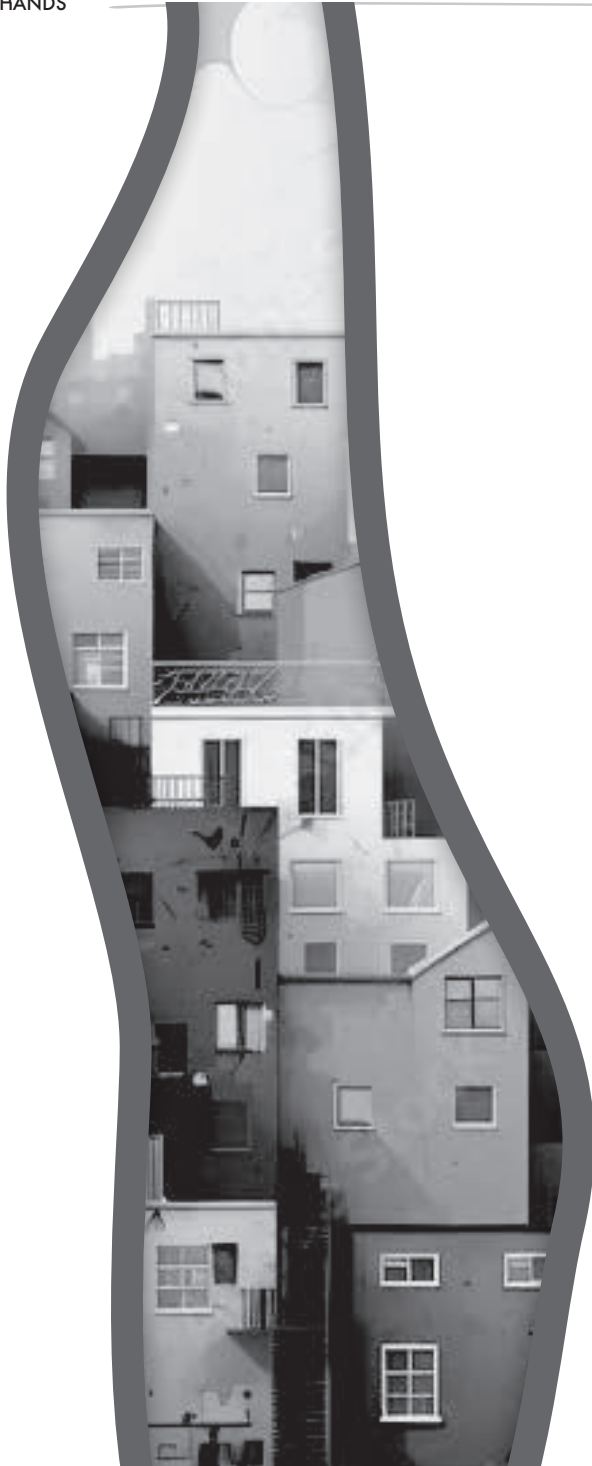
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INTRODUCTION: SAFETY FIRST

Concern about safety is often present for most of us, regardless of the conditions of our life. Home and private security is a major industry. The news leads with something we should fear. The police are the subject of constant conversation. If we don't feel safe in our neighborhood, the instinctive answer is that more professional help is needed. Cameras. Police. Moving out street people. People working in each of these programs will tell you they are doing all they can, or that more funding is needed. Also, for many people, the emotional unease associated with the inevitabilities of life is expressed as feeling unsafe.

We want to explore here an alternative way of addressing concerns about safety, especially in our neighborhoods. Regardless of whether the neighborhood is very wealthy or very not wealthy. This is written for citizens concerned with community well-being, specifically the desire to end violence and to experience a feeling of greater security in their communities. The intent is to spark a transformation in the context within which citizens consider what will make their community a safer place.

Much of the public conversation is about ending violence. We want to offer a way of thinking that is not violence focused but begins by activating the common good — block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood. We choose to engage in a conversation that takes us away from thoughts of reforming the police and engaging public officials for solutions. We explore ways of thinking and doing that bring citizens together to discover for themselves ways they can reclaim control over their own well-being.

We begin by not giving attention to what's wrong with a neighborhood or an institution.

Instead, this conversation is about ways for citizens to connect with one another and realize we have the capacity to care for each other's well-being. The context is that citizens have the gifts to do this and once they first get connected to each other, and then work in partnership with the professionals, our security is more assured.



IN A WORD THERE IS A WORLD

When someone asks, “Is my neighborhood safe?” a world is created. It leads to conversations of fear, protections, and teaching our children that strangers are dangerous. We cross the street when we see a group of young people hanging out on the corner. We worry about the latest home invasion or murder reported in the news, even though it’s a thousand miles away. We fear people we don’t know. We fill online platforms with rumor and caution.

Safety is a word that now carries the connotation that more arms, surveillance cameras, and uniformed people bring less crime, less disorder, less violence. As commonly used, it also implies that community well-being — in this case a sense of safety and security — can be purchased from trained professionals. The challenge is that we have evidence that these solutions do not increase safety or reduce crime. They capture criminals, but do not reduce crime.

Suppose we approached safety not as a problem to be solved or helped through the optics of deficiencies, but rather through what strengths exist, what is in place, and what is waiting to be expanded. As police chief in Longmont, Colorado, Mike Butler approached safety by focusing on neighborhood cohesion and began to see that citizens in each particular place are the authors of their own safety.

This puts aside talk of reforming the police, electing new leaders, increasing consequences.

We are suggesting a shift to looking through the perspective of context, mindset, connection, and citizen agency. We still need institutions, leaders, and service providers. We just need to rethink their relationships with citizens, from one of citizen as dependent customer, to one of believing citizens are capable of being responsible for their own well-being.

The Context of Safe

Safety means different things to different people. To a woman in an abusive relationship, an alternative to violence means feeling safe in her own home. Same with a child who has an abusive parent or older sibling. They just want to know they are safe where they live. If you live in a neighborhood where there is constant drug dealing, you can feel unsafe or believe your family or children are not safe. If you live in a neighborhood where street violence is happening, you can feel unsafe or believe your family or children are not safe. If you live on a busy street with high volumes of high-speed traffic, you can feel unsafe.

All these situations come up in our personal, institutional, political, or media-ized conversations that involve the armament or disarmament of people, more police, more legislation, different leaders. This is where the conversations have plateaued or have become cyclical or more rigid in their nature. As a society, we are currently stalemated by these conversations.

Shifting the Context

For decades, maybe centuries or even millennia, we have criminalized our woundedness and taken quick-fix, one-size-fits-all approaches. In so doing, we have caused more harm than we intended. We “de-

clared war” on many of our health and social issues, such as drugs and poverty, and one could make the case that we won none of them. The other residual has been the gradual buildup of a highly rigid and very expensive criminal justice complex, with more police and more prisons, that has become the default go-to response for past, present, and even new health or social issues.

In other words, the most common ways we respond are the taken-for-granted solutions to concerns about reducing violence. None of them are cheap and all involve better or different leaders plus more professional services of all types.

The alternative we are exploring here is a community conversation about reducing violence in which citizens become a large part of the answer. What if we shifted our attention from solving problems to creating social capital? What if we valued above all else the functions and authority of citizens that we see in healthy communities? The intent is to use this thinking as a way to work with public officials and institutions to write a different story about where we are. Even though we have reached the limits of our existing institutions, we still have a need for the functions they perform. As John McKnight might ask, what are the neighborly functions that must be performed to produce public safety and where in our society should they be placed?

The Asset Based Community Development Institute (ABCD) has a method to establish relationships among people on a block by going door to door and asking about what each person values most about themselves and their abilities.

Walking neighborhoods this way encourages people to feel and believe they belong to their community. And with every one of those conversations — inviting people to become more engaged, or asking what their interests or capabilities are — the less armament or disarmament becomes the question. What they find out by talking

with people is the scope of their ability to respond to one another. These listening conversations are a powerful tool because they rest on our basic human abilities. This is working in the Abundant Community Initiative in Edmonton, the Learning Tree in Indianapolis, the Longmont Colorado police department.

Underlying the practice of engaging neighbors to produce safety are the concepts of belonging, the idea of agency, the belief in goodness, abundance, activating the common good — all rolled together into a communal pattern language. So just beginning the initial conversation about reducing violence starts with the belief that we can create our well-being by acting on these patterns. This doesn't come without a lot of trial and error, without a lot of persistence, without a lot of commitment to something that you think is important. Ultimately that is what paves the way. We can develop different mechanisms, we can develop different programs, but we have found that success most often comes through people who have said, "This is what we want to see our community become."

Well-Being in Our Hands

Walter Brueggemann talks about a Lutheran church in his town that displayed on its public signboard during the COVID pandemic "Love God, Love Neighbor, Stay Safe." Walter's reaction was that you can pick two, but you can't have all three. You cannot love God and neighbor and stay safe. It's exactly loving God and neighbor generatively that may make you safe, but you cannot stay safe. If you follow out "stay safe," you won't risk anything to love God or to love neighbor.

Safe families and safe neighborhoods are our common destiny. Safety is not a private or individual thing. We will only find it together. We already have the evidence. There is hard data about the relationship between increased social capital and decreased violence and crime. Some very clear tables in Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* link in-

disputably the presence or absence of social capital and the presence or absence of violence. Robert Sampson's work in *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* bears this out.

Sampson and his colleagues found that two factors often predicted whether a neighborhood was crime prone: Is there mutual trust and altruism among neighbors, and are neighbors willing to intervene when children misbehave? More evidence also comes from Chicago, when a huge heat wave hit in the nineties. *The Chicago Sun-Times* declared Eric Klinenberg's *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* to be "not so much a book about weather, as it is about the calamitous consequences of forgetting our fellow citizens. . . ." Whether you lived or died depended on how connected you were with your neighbors. Low social capital cost lives.

The question is, why isn't all that evidence persuasive? Because it is called a confirmation bias or "what you see is what you get." If you decide that you are not capable of creating safety, then evidence makes no difference. The point is, more evidence is not needed to act upon the knowledge that our well-being and sense of security depends on our relationships with our friends and neighbors. We continue to look to the mayor, the city manager, the United Way. We look to social services. We look to private security. We look to Robert Frost, who declared that good fences make good neighbors, a blessing to the fence manufacturers. We are in the habit of saying we just need somebody better that can deal with violence and crime. We need a new police chief. We need a new mayor, a more effective police department, better leadership. We keep looking for political answers.

The alternative is to stop looking for political answers. No amount of voting will make me safe. No leader can promise me safety. The first task of our leaders is to manage the news. Chicago for too long has taken its identity from the amount of crime there, even if it is trending downward. We never see headlines that declare crime has

gone down in places like Chicago. When reported, decreased crime is narrated as a human-interest story, placed in the middle of the paper or at the end of the news broadcast.



WHAT IT MEANS TO BE SAFE

Taken from the old French, the word *safety* meant protected, watched over, and — most interesting — assured of salvation. The church protected you and assured your salvation, and that’s what made life safe for you. “Security” goes back to a sense of risk, meaning free from danger. In the Old Testament, the main word for safety is also a word for trust. It means confidence that the structures of social reality are reliable, and you can sleep at night because you are surrounded by those reliable supports. The narrative of Naboth’s vineyard recounts a clash of two property systems, one of which leaves you safe on your property while the other one leaves you endlessly vulnerable to violence.

Where in the Biblical communities was public safety held? How did they keep themselves safe? When the Biblical texts portray a tribal community, it was held together by a Council of Elders, which is relatively informal. In a royal society, it would be the king. And then you get kinship, or simply neighborliness. These tribes were likely not all blood related, but they had other commonalities that bound them together in a tribe. In the tribal society, the community policed itself. It didn’t have to have officers. It was a relatively static society, and people understood their role or their place or their part.

All those narratives can inform our notions of what produces a safe community. We want to consider how to reconstruct our world around what matters to us. How can we bring about safety in a way that we haven’t thought of? How can we define well-being in terms of how much we have that’s already working well?

Seeing Is Believing

What’s working well can be defined many different ways: for an individual, a family, a neighborhood, a community, even institutions. What are the gifts and strengths present? How can we expand what

we want more of, instead of focusing on how to minimize what we want less of? How do we help victims of crime heal and become more whole? If we began to address questions like those, it would change the role of what citizens do. It would change the role of institutions. It would change the role of what police departments might be responsible for.

What you measure is what you get. Our belief is that whatever you pay attention to, you strengthen. When we say “it’s” not here, “it” in fact is there; we’re giving it form, we’re giving it attention. The ABCD approach is almost totally the process of encouraging people to see what’s around them that is available to make a safe and strong community. We pay attention to what we think is important.

To make your world safe, what you pay attention to is decisive. Believing that where I am is dangerous can make it so, for I will act with caution before joining anything, stay inside more, spread fear in my conversations. If I see the capacities of where I am, this leads to acting as if goodness, joy, gifts, and kindness are embedded in who we are. In Longmont, Colorado, all it took was for one police chief to decide to act on this. In other places, all it took was for one pastor or bishop, one librarian, one case worker, one wine store owner, one environmentalist, one journalist to decide to act on this. We can call them connectors, but no need to tell them that.

The Miracle at Longmont

Longmont, with a police chief as a connector, became a safer place when the police provided a convening function, creating occasions for citizens to care for each other. When the police provided a restorative context when offenses occurred, their goal was to give people on the edge an alternative to the criminal justice system. When the safety institution’s primary function was to invite neighbors to regular police meetings, to encourage them to come to gatherings on community building, and to form associations and create new un-professionalized

options for troubled people, safety was well served.

The experience there showed that focusing on goodness might be a much more powerful force than focusing on evil. Goodness is the possibility that trumps evil. And so, if we were to focus on what's good inside people, what's good inside communities, what's good inside neighborhoods, what's good inside police organizations, and began the change process that way, we would find much more sustainability in our actions, much more long-term benefit.

A simple example would be the experience of walking into a parent–teacher conference where people are more ready to talk about what's possible than what the problems are. Here is what your child is good at. Period. If you start off with the deficiencies or you start off with who's wrong and who's right, you immediately set up conversations, relationships, and energy that polarize. But if you start off with what's working well — whether it's in a classroom, or with people, organizations, or communities — it's a different take.

Starting off from a place of goodness puts everyone more or less on a level playing field around how to move forward. It also taps into the spiritual circuitry that exists but which we just don't acknowledge enough in terms of the connectedness it provides and the humanity that it can foster. Mike tells a story from Longmont that illustrates:

There were three men named Anson, Eusebio, and Reuben who resided in Longmont. They were characterized as “frequent flyers,” people without homes and without family or friends. The police responded hundreds of times to each of these men over the years. In Anson's case, the police responded well over a thousand times. At one point, during the bitter cold of winter, we found Anson frozen to the ground, in his own urine. All three men were deeply and chronically addicted to alcohol. All three were no longer allowed in either of our hospitals due mainly to very disruptive behavior. Our community, from within the context of a

retributive and fear-based model approach, passively and overtly, gave up on each of these men. And, as is the case in every mid-size or larger community in America, there were many more men and women who were similar to Anson, Eusebio, and Reuben.

Then Longmont public safety began to respond in a different way to those struggling with chemical substance addiction. They started with the Angel Initiative. In essence, if anyone struggling with a chemical substance addiction walked through the front doors of the justice center, waved their white flag, and said, “I need help,” staff from Longmont public safety would find them addiction treatment. Longmont public safety had already worked out agreements with more than one hundred addiction treatment service providers to provide free residential or intensive outpatient treatment to anyone who participated in the Angel Initiative.

The goal of the Angel Initiative wasn’t just to provide treatment. The bigger purpose was to shift the narrative, the perspective, the conversations, and indeed the culture surrounding Longmont’s response to people struggling with addiction or their mental health. The Angel Initiative acknowledged and then leveraged the abundant goodness that resided in their community. When informed about the Angel Initiative, many people in Longmont stepped up to help. Dozens of employers agreed to employ people in recovery. Others helped find housing for those in the Angel Initiative. There were many people who helped with transportation to and from treatment or other basic needs. There were folks who agreed to be part of a person’s social network. There were even people who opened their homes to those in recovery. A new non-profit was formed and operated out of one of the local churches. It became a place of refuge for those struggling with addiction.

Hundreds of people in Longmont volunteered for assignments, ranging from food preparation to transportation to becoming part of a person’s social network. The goal was to surround people with

as many healthy relationships as possible. Those who volunteered were motivated by their goodness.

To move the story along: Anson, Eusebio, and Reuben, over a period of a couple of years, moved forward from their chronic addictions. Each of them found housing and jobs and, in two cases, were reunited with their families. There were literally hundreds of others who followed similar paths, all due to a structure and practice for activating the abundant goodness within the community of Longmont.

The Angel Initiative in Longmont is testament to the fact that every community has this abundant goodness available to it. Because we can sometimes get lost in the drama of the news, or the drama of our social networks, or even of our everyday conversation, we tend to lose sight of that possibility and shift in context.

LEADERSHIP IS NOT THE POINT

In seeking paths to neighborhood well-being and understanding how safety is part of that, the experience in Longmont is a useful and compelling story. The task of each of us is to translate it and customize it, so that that the path is accessible to any of us interested in alternative ways to safety.

Most every story like Longmont's is told with a focus on some local leader. This is the downside and liability of a story. We romanticize leaders and give them special qualities, partly because it provides us with an excuse. When we say we're looking for our local hero to come along, it lets us off the hook. Whereas if we have trust in that path, and the belief that we, together, can create our own version of Longmont, the option becomes available the moment we find a couple of others to make it doable and within reach.

In terms of the police question, the reason there aren't more stories like Longmont's is because of what people expect of a police chief. "We were able to reconstruct an alternative to the historic expectations of the role," Mike says. "In its simplest form, we began with inquiring of people all around us what they have to contribute."

But this is too simple an explanation. The theory of change was an invitation. Let's go deeper into the form that it took in Longmont.

A Story from a Sunday Walk

It begins with a walk. That can occur in whatever we care about: safety, health, raising a child. For every one of these concerns, that path takes us to the same place.

This is how Mike says it worked for Longmont:

Dan Benavidez and I began regular Sunday walks. We would

walk down a neighborhood street and when we looked around our modus operandi was to find people who were outside. They could be doing anything. If you were outside, we were going to approach you. We didn't care what you were doing.

One Sunday, it was a warm summer day. This guy was sitting on the front porch, no shirt on, smoking a cigarette. And from what we could see of him, he was tattooed from his belt buckle to his hair. And Dan and I didn't care. We were just walking down the street.

We walked up to the porch and identified ourselves. I wasn't in uniform, so I said, "Hi, I'm Mike Butler, public safety chief." Dan says, "I'm Dan Benavidez. I'm a former mayor pro tem in the community. We're here walking neighborhoods and just greeting and meeting people and asking questions."

The guy on the porch told us his name was Ron and then raised his hands and said, "In the interest of full disclosure, Chief, I just want you to know all of your officers know who I am. They know I've been arrested several times. I've been in jail. I just got out of jail. I'm struggling with addiction. I hurt a lot of people in my life."

Those were almost the first words out of his mouth, and I'm paraphrasing, but it was along those lines.

And he says, "I just want you to know that's who I am. Because you're probably going to check on me anyway." And I said, "Listen, Ron, I'm not interested in your past. I'm interested in what's going on for you now and perhaps what you might be able to offer in the future. Can we have a conversation about that?"

He was shaking. He had the shakes of someone who was perhaps struggling with a little bit of withdrawal. So, he sat back down

on the porch, which kind of neutralized the atmosphere for everybody, because he was a big guy. We began talking. Dan had his way of greeting and having these conversations. I won't go through it all, but we had about a 15- to 20-minute conversation.

Near the end of all our conversations like this, we make a request: We invite everybody to join us. We say, "Hey, we have a great community here, but we struggle with things too. We struggle with folks who have addictions, who have mental health issues, who are homeless. We have lots of things going on, and we need everybody we can get to help out. Would you be willing to help? I can see you as a person who's a former gang member, or as someone who has a certain history, so being able to help young people, who might be figuring out what choice they need to make right now, to maybe down a different path in their life."

Ron said yes. And then what came out was an amazing emotional response: big tears rolling down his face.

He said, "I just got out of jail a week ago. This is my mom's house. I'm staying with her until I can get a place of my own. I don't know when that's going to be. And I'm struggling with all that." And then he says, "To feel needed . . ." and his voice trailed off.

To feel needed was almost cathartic for him. It was healing. It was a sense that someone thinks I have something to offer outside of all the things I've done in my life and in spite of all the things I've done in my life. Bottom line, it was a great opportunity for us to see that "waiting to be needed" was a piece in him that he was ready to hear. Maybe two weeks prior to that, we might not have gotten that far. But we hit it with Ron at the right time.

There was a timing thing with that conversation that Dan and I both talked about long afterwards. Ron was waiting to be needed. He was waiting to be asked. He was waiting to be invited.

Into a World within Reach

In Longmont, Mike says, “We created what Walter Brueggemann would call a covenantal public service, a relationship-based public service. It was what Peter Block might say was a response to violence based on relational activism.”

We shifted a lot of the things that we did within our community to reflect the importance of social fabric, of neighborhoods, of having a public organization where the people actually had a voice and a sense of partnership with one another and with the public safety organization. We did a lot of work to strengthen neighborhoods and the role we could play in terms of initiating the conversations that needed to occur within specific neighborhoods where violence was an issue.

Here’s a list of specific things I did in the first three months of my tenure:

- Opened up ALL meetings to everyone
- Met with every person on staff in groups of five to ten, four different times
- Began meeting with each elected official and then met regularly with each elected official twice per year
- Started to meet with various people in the community
- Started and sustained conversations regarding principles of stewardship — within the department and in the community. Purchased fifty copies of Peter’s *Stewardship* book for people from the staff and community to read.
- Created a partnership with the media
- Began conversations to reference longer term thinking
- Intentionally talked with people “as I passed by”
- Began conversations about our changing role in the community
- Placed a moratorium on the development of any new policies or procedures

Of course, many more actions occurred as time went by.

Most change processes, most change models, begin from the perspective of here's what's not working. Here's what's deficient. Here are the problems and how are we going to solve those? Versus here's what's good, what works well, here's what we want to see more of. As Mike has often said:

Our own experience says that the more we could focus on that and get that to expand, the more the things that we didn't want to see were crowded out or were minimized.

We went at it from that perspective, which is the opposite of what we do today in our society. Our society still approaches it from the perspective of what's the problem? What's deficient? What do we need to solve? We have some real-world experience with an alternative, and then we have supporting data because there's a lot of people who want to see the data.

Did it work over time? We have data to support that too. In fact, it did. Our public safety staff were very much engaged with partnership, connecting, and basically inviting people. We did a lot of invitations to people to become more engaged and more involved. What's interesting as well is that we spent most of our time in neighborhoods where people didn't own property. Mobile home parks or apartment complexes. The kind of neighborhoods where a lot of folks tend to be forgotten or they exist on the margins, or where, because people come and go, they're considered more transient. It was amazing how many people we encountered who really wanted to make a difference in their own neighborhoods.

That's a perspective that is much different from what's happening today. It's a perspective that I believe needs to be out there in a different way so that people know what we mean when we say we want to shift context and culture and impact the sense of

how neighborhoods can function at an entirely different level, including ones that are secure, that feel secure and safe. They basically need to do that in order to move into a perspective that institutions can play a role along with other forces in the neighborhoods and communities that exist.

One of the things that we focused on as well was rethinking how we could deal with the human condition differently than just invoking the criminal justice system. We put a lot of things in place that were alternatives and options to the criminal justice system to deal with what we call crime and disorder. Crime and disorder are the typical terms used, but ultimately, it comes down to people being people and humans being humans and then the question becomes how we could deal with that in a way that had more restorative and more sustainable value.

We used restorative principles and practices in a much deeper way to deal with what was going on in our neighborhoods and our community — whether it was folks struggling with mental health, folks struggling with addiction, whether it was crime-related things, definitely kids. We knew that there were all these other forces that we could harness. We also wanted institutions to have as their primary goal the good of the whole, where their aspiration is to bring value to a community that might be suffering from disconnectedness or isolation.

The question that we kept asking ourselves in discussions that we had — not only within our own organization, but with people in our community — was what can we do to add value?

Our police officers were selected, schooled, skilled, and trained to form relationships and partnerships with people, families, neighborhoods, businesses, churches, non-profits, other city departments, schools, and others in our community. We wanted to create the kind of relationships in which people felt comfort-

able making requests. Our responses to requests could range anywhere from no to yes to conditional replies. We also assisted in developing more and more leaders/connectors, especially in the Hispanic community.

Dan and hundreds of public safety staff walked thousands of neighborhoods over the years, and not once did we encounter a neighborhood that would be considered unsafe — this was in later years after much of the work in our neighborhoods was well underway. That was not only from our perspective but from the overwhelming perspective of citizens we encountered on our walks.

Going Deep

What Dan and others in Longmont did was another version of scale, meaning they went deeply into a world within reach. If people want scale, they should go deeply into where they are as opposed to taking what they're doing and wanting it to happen in a thousand communities. As soon as you say, "I want to go global," you've given a breeding ground to your own helplessness because you're waiting for it.

Also, they confronted people and issues that had turned away from the institution. They believed that you don't want the institution to be an enemy, you want to partner with them. How often do you hear that the system is broken? And the protestors who are all about "We need something else." But they don't know what else to do. All they can do is take their anger to the streets. They think that if they are radical with it, it will draw a lot of people to it.

In other words, in Longmont they went at justice from the perspective of what works. Mike and his staff asked, "What do we want to see more of? What is good and how do we expand that in a way that can crowd out the things we don't want to see?"

Our metric for effectiveness was that we were no longer needed. We came in as people who could potentially start conversations and help folks initiate their efforts to try to figure out how to find connection, how to find themselves, and how to build that sense of social capital within their own neighborhoods, and then slowly but surely move away, back out of those things, and allow those neighborhoods to become self-sufficient.

We worked hard to reduce a sense of dependency on the police. We placed a premium on conversations, and the development of relationships and sustainable connections. We encouraged and invited as many people as we could to be part of enhancing safety, fostering civility, and encouraging a larger sense of service to others.

As we walked in neighborhood after neighborhood, listening and inviting, we began to see that when neighbors got together to look out for one another, it was amazing how little they needed the police. And in the end, our approach reduced serious crime and created safer neighborhoods. Over and over, citizens continuously told us they felt safe in their neighborhoods. Crime in the city decreased by 50 percent. Calls for service in the neighborhoods where the citizens became more active were dramatically reduced. The number of self-identified gang members went from 450 to fewer than 60. Gang violence disappeared. Lethal domestic violence was reduced from two or three women dying each year to only two (still too many) over twenty years.

The hallmark of a healthy community is that they end up being very self-sufficient in terms of complementary ways of being with each other. But it also means that the people who have natural authority in a community have to step up. They have to act out that role in some effective way. They can't turn it over to another.

The Sunday walks in Longmont offer a useful insight into how to

start on the path to connection and intimacy by shifting the conversation to gifts and capacities. They talked with thousands and thousands of people about their desire to offer their gifts. They just didn't know how. They just didn't know what they could do. And in many cases, they had been told by the professional folks that they really shouldn't offer their gifts because the professionals were the only ones trained to do that.

So, people in Longmont didn't know if they had permission to offer their gifts. Gifts of care, attention, fixing a lawnmower, teaching someone how to use a computer, gardening, checking in on certain people, cooking, fishing, talking people down from extremes. They didn't know if their gifts meant anything to anybody. They didn't know where to go, what to do. They didn't have a sense of connection with others around how they could do that.

GOODNESS IN OUR MIDST

If we took goodness seriously, where would it take us? Walter Brueggemann says *good* is a very volatile word because Pharaoh has adopted goods and services as being the whole point of happiness. The consumer economy says what you need are more goods, but those are not the “good” we’re talking about.

There is a series of imperatives in the book of Amos in which he lines out first, “Seek the Lord.” Then he says, “Seek good.” And then he says, “Seek justice.” And those are for him three synonyms: God, good, and social/economic justice. So, goodness is a covenantal practice of neighborly fidelity and justice. The accent is very much on the communal. And that is very much what we have to recover: after accepting God and after collective goodness, then it’s possible to imagine economic or social justice.

For communities seeking local well-being, all that means is to focus more on the goodness that exists than on the goodness that can be inspired and trained. There are many examples of where a future of well-being now exists. We have found that understanding that reality is more persuasive than beginning a visioning process by asking what goodness would look like in my neighborhood. The work John McKnight has done has been in the discovery of gifts, not in the creation of gifts. To discover something is to finally see what’s been there all along.

What does goodness look like? How does it play out? What are the applications? How do you move away from the commercial approach, where institutions are formed and produce outcomes within communities? What does that look like in a family, in a neighborhood, in a community? The path to community well-being begins to answer those questions in terms of how goodness has manifested itself and the value it has within a person in a relationship, in a family, in a neighborhood, in a community.

On the Usefulness of Our Goodness

There is goodness all around, but it often is not prevailing. Even so, Longmont found that, on every block, most of the people there were waiting to be invited to share their goodness. Once that's identified and visible, you're shifting culture to a world driven by the goodness that we have been talking about.

The idea of goodness leads people out of certain kinds of thinking into another way. If we're surrounded by goodness, how do we move? Walter's take is that goodness, abundancy, generosity, kindness, compassion, and love, take origin in our divinity. We're talking here about goodness being inherent in the communal conduct of our day-to-day life together.

It's clear from our experience that part of the context of producing community well-being is the goodness that's in our midst. It's everywhere. It exists in families, in neighborhoods, in communities, and in individual people. It is the antidote that, if more fully activated, could create neighborhoods and communities characterized by kindness, generosity, a spirit of belonging, and people going the extra mile for others. The goodness we are referring to is just waiting to be leveraged as a force that can connect people in neighborhoods; break down racial, generational, and cultural barriers; and be the foundation for surfacing and activating the abundant social capital that the sense of neighborhood safety requires.

Many Paths to Safety

Our intent is to leverage goodness to produce a sense of neighborhood security and well-being. Where does that come from? The Ten Commandments is an outline version of how to get there. The way Walter sometimes speaks of the Bible is that it presents ideas that have survived many generations. There is something enduring about those narratives.

The Biblical trigger for the common-good response to violence is the word *covenant*, which means that the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor, are bound in a common destiny so that the modern love of individualism is the great enemy of covenantal connectedness. We live in a system where you can be under the illusion that you can create for yourself a security system that has no reliance on anyone else. And that leads to predatory economics, a predatory culture. The alternative is to act on the belief that we are bound to each other in a common destiny and the fact that we cannot escape each other, we cannot evict each other, we cannot expel each other, is a reality of our existence.

Social scientists identify social capital as a major factor in producing public safety. By “social capital” they mean the trust-building groups you find in neighborhoods such as block clubs and neighborhood organizations as well as the many less formal groups such as sports clubs, faith communities, and business associations. It is the often-invisible network of these trust- and relationship-building groups that, together, have more to do with preventing violence and increasing safety than the police can achieve with their traditional functions and practices. So, the common good response to safety threats depends on not always calling the police and instead calling your neighbors and taking responsibility for what goes on in the neighborhood.

Jane Jacobs — author, activist, and icon of the importance of a vital neighborhood — wrote years ago that a safe place is produced by eyes on the street. It is produced by people walking around, sitting outside, knowing their neighbors, and being part of a social fabric. No number of gates or professional security people, cameras or citizens on patrol, can make us safe. They can increase arrests, but basically safety is in the hands of citizens — citizens outside the house, interacting with others, being familiar with the comings and goings of neighbors, joining something, anything. Opportunities

for accidental contact.

Another path comes from the tradition of the jubilee year, in which justice means giving back to people what they have to have to live. The jubilee year, also called the year of release, occurred every seven years when debts were forgiven. Every forty-nine years the land was returned to its rightful owners. Jubilee created a reprieve where there was a return of property to people who had lost it in the rough and tumble of the economy. It was a belief that people had inalienable connections to their property. No tax system or banking system could break that attachment. It occurs in modern times as community land trusts.

Suppose the determinants of health and safety were one and the same. John tells the story of serving on the health committee of a neighborhood organization on the west side of Chicago, a committee made up of all African Americans, all women. He was supposed to get things started, so he asked them to break into groups and talk about what it is that makes us healthy. The women came back after a long discussion with a list of eight things that they thought produced health for people in their low-income neighborhood. The thing that impressed John was there was no mention of anything medical, at all.

In answering the question “What makes us healthy?” the women didn’t say anything about doctors and hospitals. Instead, they talked about factors like landlords who should be forced to change the lights on the stairways on the second and third floor of their buildings. Now, is that a safety measure or a health measure? What John saw in their list was that the things they had suggested that made us healthy really included aspects of safety. Like in the summer, kids take the plug off the fire hydrant and let the water spray on the street. So, the kids out there playing in the water in the street was unsafe.

Even more striking in the Westside Health Authority story is the way the health committee became an activator for change, shifting the

context and actually changing the community's culture. Neighbors asked, "What can we do, and do it our way?" They lived the idea that citizens are the best authority on their own mental, physical, and spiritual health. "Authority" was built into the organization's name, the Westside Health Authority, which declares that it is dedicated to using the capacity of area residents to improve the well-being of the community.

Something Is Required of Us

Think of what is universal about Longmont. The public safety issues there were different in every neighborhood: some had drug houses; some had gang issues; some had various kinds of disorder; some had issues related to violence; some lacked affordable housing; some had traffic issues; some had all the above.

Each neighborhood also had its own type and amount of social capital. Some had neighborhood connectors; some had people initially willing to help. Without exception, every neighborhood had already made numerous calls to the police and occasionally to other government departments for assistance.

The police department started to engage citizens in producing alternatives to violence only with an invitation from the neighborhood. Once they heard comments like "What are guys doing about the crime in our neighborhood?" or "I am calling my city council representative to complain about the police department" or "I am not safe in my neighborhood and I'm going to move," they would ask if people would like to learn how to enhance and sustain the sense of safety in their neighborhood. They also always asked if the neighbors in one neighborhood would be willing to offer assistance to those in other neighborhoods. Invariably, people would say yes.

In Longmont, police officers served multiple roles as conveners, facilitators, advisors, inviters, encouragers, mentors, and, yes, even

enforcers. But the neighborhood was responsible for making choices from the varied options that presented themselves about what they wanted to be.

It's one thing to talk about giving a community more responsibility and taking tasks off the shoulders of institutions, leaders, service providers, professionals. It's a whole other thing, if there is a gap or a vacuum, for people to fill that gap or vacuum. And that's the role that institutions can get a lot better at.

It wasn't just that the Longmont public safety department provided a service; it was answering the question of how to create a space for people, whether it was staff or people in the community, to become more engaged. When they opened up those doors, there was a lot of reluctance, initially. A tremendous amount of reluctance in the form of, "I pay your salary. I pay taxes. This is what I'm used to." People were also expressing their own unhealthy dependency, which was the track they had been on for decades. And so, an underlying message was, "Why would you want to change all of this and make me do something myself?"

The Longmont story portrays a useful role for institutions. There is a place for recognizing the value institutions can play in creating a different future. It's not something institutions often see. There are very few government institutions at local, state, or federal levels — or other institutions, whether they're school districts, whether they're religious institutions, economic or medical institutions — saying there's a shared responsibility here and we're going to help people understand what their role is in that shared responsibility, and we will carve out resources within our institution to do just that.

A Different Role for Our Institutions

As we have mentioned all along, what is under consideration here is shifting how associations and citizens work with institutions,

policy makers, and public services. Institutions have the ability to convene and value the participation and gifts of neighbors. That shifts accountability for well-being to citizens. It is an additional form of expertise. Renegotiating a contract between the public servants and service providers and the community could very well be an institution's responsibility or role.

Beginning with the Exodus event, the Bible is an ongoing articulation of the struggle between those who are on top and control things and those who are restless about being controlled and disadvantaged. As Walter says, the narrative is an adjudication of tension, which in the New Testament finally ends up in the crucifixion of the one below. That's what we're talking about here: the strain in moving from conversations about the experts, the numbers, the measurements, the agendas, the platforms to conversations that connect people in building trust and making things better. Social capital.

RECLAIMING AUTHORITY

The development of the authority of a neighborhood to take responsibility for the work that makes a neighborhood livable is where things get practical. The only way to an alternative to violence is for neighborhoods to become the center of authority for their safety instead of the police.

If a neighborhood said, “Here’s a list of activities we have to do to function as the authority for our well-being,” and then engaged in all those activities, you would have a neighborhood culture that would be nonviolent. Specifically, we want to be responsible for our well-being and to ourselves produce safety, health, a clean environment, enterprises, local food, raising of our children, and care of the vulnerable. That’s our work. And if you put that list before most neighborhood groups, you won’t get much argument.

Seeking and Initiating Goodness

The word “influencers” is used quite often today. And perhaps goodness can be a similarly sustainable, almost infinite, power. Goodness could be something that lasts, something that attracts the next generation.

Perhaps we could begin to talk about a great community in terms of the extent of its goodness. And so, a great community is one that has great goodness, a great country is one that has great goodness, a great organization is one that has great goodness. At each of those levels we can find goodness manifests itself in different ways so that scale is the variable at work within the subcategories of goodness. There is the individual. And there are other collective structures — the family, the neighborhood, the town. Where would you look, what would you look for, and what would you find that’s different from place to place, from structure to structure?

Another way might be to see goodness in terms of protecting people from scarcity. Scarcity is the condition which consumerism promises to solve but can't deliver on. The real power of abundance and goodness is the idea that it can create things that didn't exist. Goodness can create things. Abundance can create things. Abundance and goodness can actually minimize the things we don't want. The expansion of things that we want is what crowds out the things we don't want.

That's our theory of change: If you cultivate goodness, and nurture enough abundance, scarcity will die from lack of attention.

Voices Wanting to Be Listened To

The invitation here is to join us in acting on what we know about how we as a neighborhood, as a community, can produce well-being, including feeling and being more safe. With that invitation a different conversation and path to action ensues. It's like the analogy about parents going in for a conference with their child's teacher. It's a very different and painful conversation if you start talking about what the teacher is doing wrong, how the teacher is not doing their job. Or how the student is wrong.

Instead, the path is formed from the idea of addressing possibilities first and making that the path we take versus nitpicking around on what's wrong. It works in neighborhoods, it works in staffs, it works in institutions. It works because there's a spark in each and every person that wants to be lit, wants to be productive, wants to be more.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

This pamphlet grew out of a series of conversations among Peter Block, Walter Brueggemann, Mike Butler, and John McKnight. Their focus was on the possibilities for citizens to produce safe neighborhoods and community well-being, plus the role institutions might play in making this happen.

In these dialogues, each of the participants brings a unique perspective. Walter Brueggemann represents the spiritual, the religious, Old Testament and sacred dimension to community well-being, especially safety and security. Walter might ask: What would Elijah do, what would other prophets do, what role would they play in bringing about a less violent world? John McKnight speaks for a gifts-minded neighborhood in which local people reclaim authority for their own lives. Peter Block represents the conversations that evoke local citizen accountability and agency to act on their communal behalf.

Mike Butler is a prophet and a witness to shifting the focus from the professional to the neighbor. As a former police chief, he has imagined and implemented a unique approach to reducing violence. His life's work has demonstrated the benefits of taking the conversation from "More or better professionals are needed to fix it" to "What can we, citizens, do to provide for our safety and well-being?"

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