

Belonging Matters' Podcast

Transcript

Episode 6: What Could Be, The Future of our Communities

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Welcome to Belonging Matters podcast series. Now available on Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, Spotify, and www.belongingmatters.org. You can email Belonging Matters at info@belongingmatters.org. Episode Six, 'What Could Be, The Future of our Communities.' Tim Costello is one of Australia's most sought after voices on issues of social justice, leadership and ethics. From 2004 to 2016, Tim served as CEO of Worldvision, Australia's largest international development agency, trained in law and theology, Tim has practiced law, served as a Baptist minister, and has been active in church and community leadership, local government and national affairs. Currently, Tim is the executive director of MICA Australia, a movement of Australian Christians raising a powerful voice for justice and a world free from poverty. Tim is also director of

Ethical Voice. In this podcast, Tim reflects on the future of our communities.

This is an article I wrote in 2013, what could be the future of our communities? I wrote a book 'Hope', largely because I was troubled. I was troubled that I have never seen Australian so grumpy and polarised and aggressive and feeling dismal. A lot of it has to do with Canberra and the political leadership really on both sides, just the negativity. Really what I felt was a loss of perspective, which is why talking about communities today actually fits with why I also wrote this book 'Hope'. When we step back and think about where we are in world history, we are still blessed. All of us in this room, and this might shock, you're in the top 1% of the richest people in the world. I know you think that's Gena Reinhardt and Rupert Murdoch, they are point zero zero one richest percent, but we are on the top 1% of the richest people in the world. I think this is really important when we think about community, because community is the basic quality of human life that gives us perspective, that allows us to swap stories, to make sense of our place. Community is actually the place where we sort out who we are, get perspective, understand how we live our lives. It's a very basic quality of human life, and yet community's meaning has changed over time. We all know it's profoundly human to live together, to form groups, to share with each other, to support each other. There is a few odd exceptions, there's hermits, anchorites they are sometimes called, but for the rest of us, they are the exception. Community is the natural state, across cultures across historical times, giving us perspective on what it means to be human. That is the great advantage of

community. It takes many forms. Its family, its membership derived from ties of blood, or kinship, or tribe. Well, we don't talk of tribes in Australia, unless we're talking football and being an Essendon supporter I'm not going to be talking football today. Today is judgement day for my tribe. But community is that experience in family, in village, in town, in religion, of actually sort of working out our tribe, and who we belong to, and what our duties are. And then working out perspective on where we stand. There are accidental communities, the bonds we share with people we never expected to share a bond and we find something in common. And it's a joy, a gift and surprise. And I think you've all had those experiences. Sometimes the bonds are because we went to school with them. They are in our neighbourhood or on a holiday 20 years ago, we just clicked and we've stayed in communal relationship with them. Today community is reappearing in new forms and the idea of community is coming up against new challenges. As we look ahead 10, 20, 30 years, do we see a future for communities as we know them? Or will they all be virtual communities? groups of people communicating with each other in 140 character messages? Will the communities of the future be self selecting? We'll just edit out anyone who is different to us and really have a tight sense of, we actually are the same and we feel comfortable with that. Or will we allow people who challenge us maybe even disturb our thinking into our community? I hope we will. You don't get perspective when it's just the same people. When we lose perspective, we become grumpy and hope evaporates.

I hope that we will continue to recapture the genius of communities of old. In village communities of old everyone, regardless of their background, or wealth, or any other characteristic had the opportunity, in fact, the need to rub up against others, even if they were different. In country towns, everyone has almost a primary relationship, even with the town drunk, when it's small, and you know, you can avoid the Trump town drunk, you actually have to find a way of relating. It's very interesting in urban life. Primary relationships are more difficult because of the speed of our relationships. We might say "G'day, how are you doing" to the checkout person, but if she actually starts to give us an answer, she becomes a menace, people behind us get furious. It's a secondary relationship. We don't really want a primary relationship with her. It's just a form of words from village days, how are you going? We don't want to wait for the answer. When we travel on public transport, your face can be so close to the person you're standing next to, you know what they had for breakfast. But we have developed a very urban, sophisticated skill of totally ignoring their existence, speed and efficiency and a market actually disintegrates some of that. So we develop protective skills where that person whose face six inches away from us on the train, literally is invisible, and we are to them. Today's communities still include a large interaction with diverse people, and they need to. Our communities of the past weren't perfect either. In a country town, if you ended up pregnant, the shame and gossip meant you fled to the city and the city actually was, with its anonymity, a relief from shame and stigma. We don't want to simply idealise the past. But I think we can see there are trends. There is a trend and we need to name it towards greater

individualism. It's a result of a community versus consumer society, where we measure our consumption and efficiency and therefore secondary, not primary relationships, the speed and the collection of things and people are just incidental. My wife's mother used to shop at the South Melbourne market. And she'd always stop for a check with people, the fishmonger and her would sort of flirt. And if she gave him a kiss, she would get the fish for half price. Now, whatever you think of that story, there is something about actual human relations where you are recognising, this isn't just about speed and efficiency. I tell the story in my book 'Hope' of taking my kids to McDonald's, and being really troubled by the fact that everything was fast, including the food. Having had them in a car, where I filled up the tank, I'd walked in, handed over my credit card, signed for the petrol, walked out, got back in the car, roared off and realised I didn't even utter one word. That's self service. And I thought back to when my father had three kids in the FJ Holden, he would go to then what was called the garage. The attendant would check the oil for him put the air in the tires and fill up the tank. What I remember is my father always had a conversation, he talked about footy, he would often get into politics. My father was a politics teacher. And as you know, there is a little bit of politics in the Costello family. What I remember most, as a kid, was being really proud of the fact that my father could be at ease and have a conversation with a total stranger. I remember thinking, I hope, when I am older, I have that skill, being at ease with a total stranger, finding points of community and connection. So here I was at McDonald's, not because I liked McDonald's, but my teenage kids at that stage of their life didn't particularly like being seen in public with

me. If I was paying at McDonald's, they would show up. The girl came up from behind the counter, and she had a name tag on, I said, "Oh, hi Karen, are you having a good day?"

I was trying to model something for my kids. Karen looked a little bit suspicious. I misunderstood her suspicion. I said, "Oh, sorry, that's not fair, I know your name, my name is Tim." Karen now looked profoundly suspicious. I got the order from my kids and as she was busying herself getting the food, I said, "By the way, Karen, do you work here full time?" Well, Karen had warmed up a little bit, because I'm obviously a nice guy. And she said, "Well, yeah, I work here full time." I said, "Is there going to be a career for you here? Are you going to end up managing this McDonald's?" She said, "No, actually, I only work here to pay the bills. I'm a musician. We're all poor." I thought, well, this is good in a very short time. She's telling me what matters to her. Isn't that what community is all about? She's telling me of her dreams. I thought this was good. And I slowly turned around to make sure my kids were absorbing my modelling. Well, to my astonishment and embarrassment, my kids had walked out. They had had enough. When I took the food over and said to them, "Where did you go?", my daughter turned on me, she said, "You are such a nerd." I said, "What?" She said, "You embarrassed us?" I said, "How?" She said, "You're not meant to talk to her. You're not meant to call her by name and tell her your name." I said, "Well, sorry, if I'm not meant to talk to her and call her by name. But if I'm not, Why has she got a name tag on?" My daughter explained, because I was obviously very slow, she said, "Look, she's got a name tag on

because if she stuffs up, you know who to report." That was a revelation to me. I thought her name tag was about being personal and friendly. No, as my daughter saw it, it was about efficiency, accountability. Commerce doesn't define us. Community defines us. There's nothing wrong with positive individuality or individualism. But it must be balanced. It's got to be balanced with obligations towards others, with our intrinsic need, to belong, to share, to share the burden that life is difficult, and we are anxious, and we are frail. And we are not in some competitive race. It's great if each one of us enjoys success. But the good of each of us has to be balanced with the good of all of us. That's the community question. Not just individualism, the good of all of us. If we want to understand the future for our communities, we do well to look at how they've changed over the past 50 years. To understand that and then to try and shape the future, because the need for community will always be a primary human instinct. Community and connectedness has a great history. It has strong value in Australian society. Traditionally, Australians sometimes thought of this, in terms of mateship. In situations of war, or disaster, and iconic places such as the gold fields and the shearing sheds, that's only one side of the story. But the idea of sticking together, or lending a hand, or rolling up your sleeves, is deep in our culture, our finest moments of community still are in fire, and flood, and sacrifice. And afterwards, we always say why can't it be like this all the time? Well, there are signs that we are not helping each other as much as we used to, in fact, not getting out and participating in community life, as we once used to. In 1967 33% of Australians were part of a voluntary organisation. By 2006, this was just 18% of Australians.

Something had shifted in individualism and looking after myself. Similar declines in joining, whether it's union membership, political party membership, far fewer people joining and attending church.

While we still love sport, we seem to love watching it more than actually participating in it. And it's interesting because when the pokies lobby tried to destroy pokies reform, they kept saying, but pokies provide great community. I discovered that in New South Wales, which has 10% of all the world's pokies, and Australia has 20% of all the world's pokies, and you wonder why I speak about this. I discovered that in Queensland where there are no pokies in towns and suburbs, outside Burswood casino, sorry, in Western Australia, where there are no pokies in towns and suburbs outside of the Burswood casino, the level of sport and community participation was something like five times greater than in New South Wales. And here were the club's saying it's pokies that brings us community. Western Australia put the light to that. In some places, especially in our cities, it seems that fewer of us know our neighbours than before. Andrew Lee has written a book about 'Disconnected Us' in Australia, and his research and figures back this up. It's the cup of sugar test. That is, who could you ask a small favour of. We now know on average, less than two of our near neighbours. On Sunday night Deputy Prime Minister Anthony Albanese gave an interesting insight into this change. He told the story of growing up in Sydney in the 1970s. He was raised by his single mum who suffered serious arthritis. For a couple of months a year his mum would be admitted to

hospital leaving him at home on his own. So who looked after him at times like this? He said the community. He said it was a very close community in those days. Neighbours would look out for him, they would make sure he had a meal every night, someone was there every night, and someone he could turn to if there was a problem. Well, you do wonder what change from the 1970s to now how many of us could say this will happen in our communities today. It really reminds us of the values of trust in community. In Anthony Albanese's case it ensured a boy of 12 was safe, and could thrive despite very challenging family circumstances. It helped him finish high school, go to university and is now Deputy Prime Minister, or was in 2013. So what's changed? Well, whether it's the advent of television and the new media, the rise of the shopping mall, the culture of consumption as an end in itself, the decline of traditional religion, changing ideas about families and relationships, changing work patterns, longer spent getting to and from work, these forces loosen the ties. And this is really paradoxical. As our wealth has grown, we've lost something more valuable than money. It's the glue that holds community together, the time spent, the care given, the relationships formed, through doing things together for a common cause, for a common good. People either are less able or less willing to get involved in the community's life. And they find themselves increasingly living lonely and fragmented lives, doing things alone that were meant to be done with others. One of the great writers in America Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, has mapped over the last 25 years what's happened to community in America. The title of the book comes from his discovery that ten pin bowling is the favourite pastime recreation of the

majority of Americans. 25 years ago, they always did it in social groups. It might be a workgroup or a church group, youth, rotary, and whatever the group, you went bowling after you'd have pizza and coffee, you would talk and share. He said bowling is still the favourite pastime of Americans today, however, with this difference. Now, a majority of Americans are Bowling Alone. It's interesting, isn't it? What was meant to be and was done socially is done alone. Putnam then develops a whole thesis about how this is bad for mental health, and how it intensifies violence and imprisonment rates, and decreases economic productivity. He studied two regions in Italy, one flourishing economically the other really failing economically. And yet these two regions had similar demography and population and economic comparative advantage to each other. So it was a mystery. Why was one flourishing and the other failing? In the end, his main finding was the region that was flourishing had this amazing, widespread network of choirs. And when people came together and sang together, afterwards, they talked about the problems with their kids the problems with their businesses, they found ways to trust that came out of singing together, which provided the opportunity to work together entrepreneurially and communally and socially. The other region was failing, didn't have community at all like this. This was his main finding for economic prosperity. Well, this is why communities matter. Disconnectedness impacts on all of us. It increases levels of fear, insecurity and violence, it impacts on those who are disadvantaged, mostly on those who are marginalised in our society, looser community ties impacts on so many informal networks that are so essential to supporting those who face challenges and

social exclusion. The bonds of community by contrast, lead to greater social inclusion, they actually express the Australian value of a fair go for all. People with disabilities and their families are one of the groups in our society who are most at risk of missing out on a fair go, who are most at risk of finding themselves on the margins of our society. When we think of a fair go, caring for people with a disability is right at the heart of it. Why? Because disability is a significant marker of social and economic disadvantage in Australia. Mental illness, and you may even have heard on this on radio last week, is the only illness in the last 60 years where we actually haven't improved the life expectancy of people with that illness. Every single other illness has the same medical advances where people will live longer, except for mental illness. 15% of the entire world's population, live with a disability, mental or physical, or something else. That's a billion people living with a disability. 80% of people living with a disability live in the world's poorest countries. So people with disabilities are the world's largest minority. In some other very poor communities where Worldvision works disabled people are related to the margins of society, a young boy died in the urban slums of Indonesia, who at the age of 12, lost the use of his arms and legs after a bicycle accident, found he couldn't walk, he couldn't hold a pen he couldn't go to school, he just lay at home on his back.

And there in that place his disability was extraordinary in it's exclusion. Well, Worldvision focused on getting medical physiotherapy and support for Dodik. And I'm pleased to say Dodik, is now walking with help. All Dodik wanted, wanted so

badly, was to get back to school. The most extraordinary day of his life, and I happened to be there, was the first day with his parents, he went back to school. The power of a simple intervention and yet, people with disabilities rarely get that chance that Dodik got in the developing world. Well, I could talk a lot more about disability, and carers and the fact that they are much more likely to have lower income levels, lower educational attainment, lower participation in the workforce. But PriceWaterhouseCoopers have done research. And they indicate Australia has compared poorly in dealing with this, with comparable rich nations. It said we ranked 21 out of 29 when it comes to rich countries, in employment rates for people with disability, and 27th when it comes to relative poverty risks for people with disability. To say the people who are disabled, and their carers who carry the burden, are part of our community, and admit we've looked away and we haven't understood their struggle and isolation is to face some truth. But more than that, I hope all of us will actually recommit to more inclusive community wherever we find it so that we can understand what Putnam was reminding us, that it's not just our relationships that are better, but even our economy is better. Recovering practices of the past that build bonds of trust and connectedness is so important. Celebrating informal, spontaneous community expressions, through storytelling, seeing how much it enriches our lives, including others excluded in our lives, is what community is fundamentally about. Having a closer look at technology and social media, it can be a source of disconnectedness. But we know that the story of community formed by Facebook, for example, during the Tasmanian bushfires called, 'Tazzy Fire we can help' was an

amazing practical way to also respond. So social media isn't all bad. We have to remember what the human drive is and keep reminding ourselves of the bigger story. It's not just the technological story, it's a human story. The paradox sometimes is the more we build into a global society, the more we need to actually know our neighbours, to turn to our local community, to restore the balance. To think of what can we do for the person who I'm very proximate to? How can we look after each other and enhance our lives? The final story in this book, 'Hope' is a story of my grandmother who had a huge impact on me. She had this thirst for knowledge and curiosity. She could recite poetry for hours, she would write beautiful letters to us, her grandchildren, thoughtful letters that stretched us. And she would suggest books we could read and ideas that could stretch us. I've kept those letters. She had this remarkable care for people in her community on weekends, we would be over there cooking all day with her, which wasn't much fun for a boy, I'd rather be out kicking the footy. On Sunday, we'd go to church and we'd have roast dinner. Then we'd pack all this excess food that we cooked into baskets. And with us in her train following, she'd head out into the community. And we will be carrying the casseroles and cakes we'd cooked to people she had heard were doing poorly. If they weren't home, she'd write a note. Otherwise she'd knock on the door and say, just heard you might need a bit of a lift and I wanted to leave this with you.

What amazed me was we were doing this with people who in many cases she hadn't actually met. And I said with surprise, "Why are we doing this Grandma, you don't even know these people?" And I'll never forget she said, "Tim, this is what you do

in community." Well, at the age of 84, she had a stroke she fell into a coma. She was in that coma many days and never came out of it before she died. The only word she said in the coma were the words "Don't forget to water them geraniums." which was puzzling because she had a nice garden but didn't have any geraniums. Her funeral was packed, that's not typical for an 84 year old. There were so many people who'd been touched by her and it wasn't until a few months after the funeral one of her daughters, my aunt, discovered a Henry Lawson story called 'Water them geraniums.' I hadn't read it. No one had Remembered Grandma reading it to us. Well, I got the story. I read it. It was a story of this woman who was a battler, raising a tribe of kids in the bush. The story was told by a rich squatter of this battling woman. In the story we don't know if the father had deserted, died, gone droving. It's a woman on her own, like so much of bush life bringing up these kids, and she's dirt poor. This woman's having to clothe and educate them feed these kids on their own. There's no social security, no safety net then. Well as the rich neighbour selecter tells the story, the one thing this battling single mom is incredibly proud of in her garden, are her geraniums. But then like many Lawson stories, it has a melancholic and tragic note. She is struck down with illness, she is dying, and as the reader, you imagine her panic, saying when I'm gone, who will feed these kids, who will clothe these kids, who will educate these kids, I am their only support. And then the last scene, as she's dying, her kids gathered around her bed, and she reminds them with her dying words. Don't forget to water them geraniums. Well, for me, I realised even on her deathbed in a coma, my grandmother was passing on her values. Whoever

you are, whatever money you make, whatever fame, whatever self importance, whatever measures you measure yourself by in a consumer society, actually, the real measure is what have you done with your relationships. Have you nourished community, those daily pedestrian, unnoticed small things, of caring for others are the measure of what you amount to. So when it comes to thinking about the future of community, right down through human history, I don't think it's changed. I think the need is profoundly the same. And we need to be those ones who water them geraniums.

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