

Belonging Matters' Podcast

Transcript

Episode 2: The Art of Belonging

Hugh MacKay

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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 Two, 'The Art of Belonging'. Hugh Mackay is a social researcher and bestselling author of 21 books, including *What Makes Us Tick*, *The Good Life* and *Australia Reimagined*. He has had a 60-year career in social research, and was a weekly newspaper columnist for over 25 years. Hugh is a Fellow of the Australian Psychological Society and the Royal Society of NSW. In recognition of his pioneering work in social research, he has been awarded honorary doctorates by Charles Sturt, Macquarie, NSW, Western Sydney and Wollongong universities. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia in 2015.

This Podcast is extracted from an interview with Hugh McKay conducted by Belonging Matters CEO Deb Rouget in September 2015, focusing on the art of belonging.”

What was the inspiration behind the book The Art of Belonging?

The book, The Art of Belonging, really grew out of the realisation that a number of people feel as though belonging really is withering, is being eroded. And as a researcher that became such a strong theme in my work, that I thought not only do I have to investigate why this has happened, but also perhaps be a little proactive and talk about what we might do to resist the trend. Because I think when you when you listen to people, particularly in our major cities and suburbs, talking about life, a very common theme is that they don't feel as connected as they used to, or they find it a bit heavy, if they are moving they find it a bit harder to break into a new community, neighbours used to automatically come and meet the new person in the street. That sort of thing doesn't happen as much as it used to. And so there are a lot of pressures on local neighbourhoods and communities not to function well. And really, the message of the book is we're going to have to work hard to resist these pressures.

In your book, you use Southwood as a fictional community. Do you think Southwood mirrors many other communities?

I created in the book just to illustrate the themes of the book, I created this suburb called Southwood, in an unnamed city, it could be anywhere. And I tried to get something that's fairly typical of a sort of broadly middle class, Australian suburb, not something dramatic with a beautiful hub, or a mountain range or any of the things that people love about some parts of Australia. But most of us live in pretty formless tracts of suburbia. And really, one of the themes of the book is even where you don't live in a place that's naturally beautiful, or even a place like some of the peninsula suburbs in Sydney, that are geographically defined communities, even if you live in one of those places where it's hectare upon a hectare of red roofs, not many trees and lots of cars and all those things, you can make it work, and it's not where you live, it's how you live. You know, I've spoken to people in fairly physically unattractive places, interspersed with light industry or, you know, very old suburbs without much vegetation and so on, and people can live in those suburbs and say this has happened, this is working, this is where we want to live because regardless of the physical environment, we are making it feel like a village you know, we know each, other we're going out of our way to act like neighbours. We don't have to imagine that our neighbours are going to be our best friends or that we To be in each other's pockets, but knowing neighbours being being on smiling and, you know, simple conversational terms, with our neighbours, with everyone in the street, depending how long the street is, is very important to our sense of physical safety, and emotional security. And none of that depends on living in a beautiful

place. But it does depend on having made those social connections.

Why is belonging important to human beings?

I think one of the tragedies of the last 30 or 40 years really has been the message that the individual is everything. We've seen not only the rise of materialism, but the rise of individualism. And this is an absolute contradiction of our true nature, the truth about human beings genetically, it's in our DNA to be cooperative, to live in communities like most of the species on planet Earth, we are social beings, we, we hunt in packs, and we're herd animals, we're tribal creatures, that's who we are. That's why we live the way we do. And it's not something that we choose, we don't say, hey, let's cooperate, let's form a little community, it's absolutely natural to human beings to live like that. What's unnatural, is to be rampantly individualistic, and competitive. We can learn to do that. But when we become preoccupied with ourselves, it's all about me, look after number one, and very competitive with other people, including the neighbours in our street, this is actually very bad for our mental health. We are far more likely to experience life satisfaction and peace of mind, and all those things that make us function better as human beings, when we have this strong sense of belonging. So it's not as though we're individuals who could choose to create a community we could belong to, it's the other way around, we are by nature, community beings, and we have to choose to opt out, you know. We've got plenty of pressure on

us to be more individual. The whole marketing industry feeds us the idea that it's all about me. The happiness industry feeds us the idea that my happiness is the most important thing. And if there's something wrong, if I'm not feeling happy, then I should change my life in some ways so I'll feel happier. All of this is a terrible distraction from our true nature, which has nothing to do with whether we're rich or whether we're happy. I mean, happiness is a fleeting emotion that comes and goes. Our true nature is to be engaged with a community in which we are responding to each other's needs, the good life, is the life marked by responsiveness to each other, to participate in creating the common good. I mean, that's what good is, when people say the good life is self indulgent, and retired to the Gold Coast to the good life, complete contradiction of, I mean, the good life is a life of goodness, a morally, praiseworthy life. And goodness is all about our relationship to each other, our responsiveness. I mean, goodness is a moral term and morality is only ever about our relationship with other people. So that's what the good life is about. You can't lead the good life in an isolated palace, with high fences, and security gates all around you, that's cutting yourself off from relationships and relationships are the lifeblood, not just of a community but of the good life.

How do we master the art of belonging?

I think the art of belonging comes naturally to us. But we have pressures at the moment working against it. So we have to

resist those pressures. The first thing we have to do is recognise that we are social beings, recognise that we can't expect to lead a full life, or feel the deep satisfactions unless we're connected with a community, that's the first step. Having recognised that then we need to engage with that community. We do need to join, we need to go to the local movies instead of always staying at home and watching television. Go to the coffee shop, join a book club, or a community garden, or community choir, or a sporting club or a film society, or a service organisation. Actually get out there and act in ways that will ensure the life of this community. But we also need to do it in really, really simple ways. By just acknowledging other people. You pass someone on the footpath, you make eye contact, you smile, you say, "Hello", you're stopping, you're waiting at a bus stop, 10 minutes before the bus comes, two or three other people are waiting. Imagine not talking to them. And yet, we don't. I mean, if a martian visited us and said, "Wait a minute, they're human beings, and they're all standing in this tiny little space waiting for the same bus. And they're ignoring each other. How do they expect communities to function if they behave like that?" It's really very easy, this idea of social capital, social capital can be built up in the simplest forms of contact, that reassure people that they're being acknowledged, they're being taken seriously, and that they belong here as much as we do. And smiling and saying hello to someone is, is an investment in that, It makes them feel 'Oh, someone noticed me.' By the way, in our big cities, the first time you smile and say hello to someone in the street, they might ignore you, but the second or third time, they will start to realise that there's no harm going to come of this.

What do you think it takes to create community? And who do you think's responsible?

We're very good at assuming that someone else is going to make this community work. And of course, to some extent, we do depend on local government and on commercial organisations to create the kind of infrastructure the hubs that will, that will feed the life of a community, we do need coffee shops, we do need pubs, we need parks and walking trails, we need libraries, and schools, and churches, and all these places where people will naturally congregate. And then be more likely to interact. Libraries are a wonderful example of how hubs can be created that have nothing to do with borrowing books, but have things to do with school holiday activities for kids or adult education classes or author talk. So all sorts of things are now going on in the modern suburban library. They act as brilliant hubs for bringing people together. So we do rely on that. But mainly, it's up to us. I mean, we go to those hubs. And what do we do when we get there, are we going to be sure we do say hello to other people? But even when we're not actually congregating, it really is up to us to make the connection. I mean, it used to be just taken for granted, if a new person moved into the street, at least their immediate neighbours would go in and say hello and bake a cake or ask them for a cup of tea or something. Not to say, hey, we want to be your best friend, but just to say we're your neighbours. So we need to know each other. Now that practice is in sharp decline in our

major metropolitan areas. People say you can move into the street, and nothing happens. There's no one who seems to acknowledge that you're there. In fact, I've spoken to several people recently who said, "I organised a street party so I could get to know the people who already live there." So that's a bit sad. But it's a wonderful example of us needing to..., if you want to live in a community, you have to make it happen.

How do we measure the success of a community?

There are a lot of factors contributing to the decline, or the threatened decline. I don't think it's an inevitable decline. In fact, I think the tide might be turning on this. I think the news is becoming much better. But there are a lot of factors. I mean, the high divorce rate is a factor, a lot of couples split. About a third of all contemporary marriages will end in divorce, in fact, more between 35 and 40%. Now that's a lot of disruption, a lot of dislocation. We've got a low birth rate. So there were a few kids operating in the neighbourhood and kids are often the social lubricant that cause families to get to know each other via the kids. The two income household means we are all working harder. We have less time and less energy for nurturing the neighbourhood on weekends. The rise of the single person household. More than a quarter of all Australian households, in fact, within the next 10 years, the Bureau of Statistics estimates one household in three will be a single person household. So just think of your street, every third household likely to contain just one person. So that creates a

much increased risk of social isolation of people not feeling easily able to integrate themselves into the life of the neighbourhood, the mobility of the population, we're moving house on average once every six years. So there's a lot of, there's a lot of movement, and that works against..., a massive increase, particularly among younger people in the 25 to 35 age group, most people are now renting rather than buy. So that's more temporary, people are more likely to move, less likely to get integrated into the life of a local...,, even our almost universal car ownership, coming and going by car, works against maintaining relationships with neighbours, waving at the neighbour's car is not the same as waving at the neighbour. And of course, the information technology revolution, which seems to bring us together and is a great blessing it does, for isolated people, it does provide them with a channel for making contact with other people. But the problem is, it makes it easier than ever to stay apart. And all the time we spend on the screen is time we might otherwise have spent with other human beings. So if you put all that together, that's a fair number of pressures, working against stable and cohesive and friendly neighbourhoods. So we are at risk of being a bit more fragmented. Sociologists talk about atomization, where we just think of ourselves as isolated adults, never joining the dots, whereas the secret of the community of course, is that we join the dots, we realise that this is where we belong we, we form a circle of neighbours, because we live in this place. So it's a matter of acknowledging all the things that work against the neighbourhood functioning, and then resisting those pressures.

What are the threats to the art of belonging?

Well, the more time people spend on the net, the social media, Facebook, Twitter, even texting, the less time there is for face to face contact. Now, a lot of that social media contact is between friends, they're people who actually know each other, but the heaviest facebook traffic is typically between about a circle of about five or six people who know each other. So it's a kind of augmentation of their personal relationships. The trouble is, it's so convenient, so efficient, so brilliant, as technology, that it can seduce people into making most of their contacts via social media. Rather than saying, "Let's get off Facebook", let's go and have a cup of coffee, or go for a walk around the block, or, you know, let's actually spend some time together. Now there's a story in the new book about two women who live in Southwood, have known each other for years, and they always used to meet for coffee and so on. Then they got busy had kids got down to phone calls, and then it got down to emails, and then it got down to posts on Facebook, until one of them rang the other and said, I'm not going to post anything on Facebook, I'm not going to send you any emails for two weeks, not going to ring you up, I want to meet for coffee. And then of course, they discovered how rich it is when you actually do get face to face. It's an entirely different experience from just keeping in touch. It's like a post-it note on the fridge. Yes, you know you have to go to the butcher, okay. That's a useful message. But if life is consisting of electronic post-it notes, this won't enhance or enrich our relationships.

Often people focus on the bad things that happen in community. What's the problem if we keep our focus on those things that may fracture communities?

We've got to acknowledge that a neighbourhood or community is a human setting. And humans are complex creatures. Driven by very noble motives and very dark motives. We have all these competing desires that we'd like to satisfy. And sometimes this brings out the best in us and sometimes the worst. Sometimes, even though we know we depend on each other, to make a community function, we sometimes will assert our independence. And that's justified. And people can be very selfish, even when they know that that's not the best way to operate. So we do have relationship breakdowns, we have disputes between neighbours, we have violence, sometimes people vandalising each other's property, I mean, all these quite ugly things go on. And we just have to acknowledge that's part of what happens when you put a whole lot of humans together. So the good guys have to be doubly good. I mean, we have to acknowledge that just because bad stuff happens doesn't mean this is a hopeless suburb, or a hopeless street, it just means we've got to do a little bit more to try and bring people together. Make sure everyone does know each other, do have a picnic in the park or drinks in the backyard one Saturday afternoon. So people, I mean, people find it very hard to maintain their feelings of hostility when they get to know each other. Now, Edith Cowan University, a few years ago, published some research which showed, this is pretty sad, but showed that only 35% of Australians say they trust their

neighbours. Now what that says to me is, there's a large number of people who are not working at being a neighbour because obviously, it could not be true that 35% of Australians have untrustworthy neighbours, it just means they don't know them. They haven't made the effort to establish..., I mean, we mistrust people generally. But I mean, there are some untrustworthy people, there are bad apples, we accept that. But generally speaking, it's fair to say that we mistrust people that we don't know. And when we get to know them, get to understand them a bit better, we may not like them, particularly, we may not share their religious beliefs or their cultural attitudes, we may want to raise our kids differently from the way they raised theirs, we may have different tastes in music, and we wish they would turn theirs down, and all that, all that sort of stuff. But fundamentally, we will tend to feel we can trust neighbours that we know. And that's, that's why it's worth the investment, to make sure that our neighbours are not strangers to us, or us to them.

What happens when people are excluded from the community, for example, people with a disability or the elderly.

With the rise of single person households, we've become much more conscious of the problems or all the potential problems of social isolation. And this is often felt, also by people with disabilities, and by their carers, who often feel that they are cut off even from the street level and the wider community. The problem about feeling social isolation is it will always make

people feel lonely. And lonely is a very bad place for humans. Because we're social creatures, it's natural for us to be in a position where social interactions or unplanned social encounters are happening on the footpath or at the shops or wherever it might be. So when we're deprived of that, it's very easy for what starts out as a feeling of, I'm a bit alone to feel like social exclusion, and social exclusion then can start to feel like alienation. So people will not just feel, I'm not proud of this scene, but they don't like me, or I don't trust them, or I'm like a fish out of water here or, in other words, we go into our cocoon, and make the situation worse by being more reclusive. So people who live alone, or people who are living with a disability or caring for someone with a disability, have a double challenge. We hope that the other people in the street or the community are going to notice them and make the overtures to make sure they're brought into the life of the community. But all of us bear some responsibility to make that happen to facilitate that. We've got to get out there as well. If there's a local film club, join it, if there's a sporting club that we could participate in, not even necessarily as a player, but as some kind of helping person, get into it, join, participate, engage, connect. It's very hard if you're living on your own, or if you're living with a disability that makes you a bit socially inhibited. And as I say, we hope that the generous spirits of the other people in the community will seek you out and bring you in. And we do, all of us, I mean, half the world are introverts. That's a form of disability too, in a way, but we have to overcome that, and put ourselves into the community setting. It doesn't happen overnight, but the possibility of connection is created, and one connection leads to more. And then week after week, after

which suddenly, you're part of the place, and you feel as if you belong, until you get that sense that I belong here. And that's to do with other people acknowledging you. Until you get that sense that I belong here, then you're not..., it's a sad time to kind of say you're not fully human, but actually it is like that, like the wholeness of the human person depends on feeling as if we belong somewhere. I remember the the American Psycho therapist, Carl Rogers wrote, towards the end of his working life, he wrote that whenever he was dealing with people who were troubled or wounded souls of one kind or another, and he said, whenever any of his clients came to a full realisation of who they are, it was always to realise that they belong somewhere, they're part of a family or part of a network of some kind of friendship circle, or a club or workplace. And often their emotional or mental disorders are associated with having forgotten that they belong, and that they had some responsibility to that network. We can spend a lot of time, particularly people who feel a bit isolated socially, you can spend a lot of time thinking, who am I, you know, what is my personal identity? And there's a lot of encouragement to think about our personal identity. I think that's all rubbish. We shouldn't waste a minute, asking Who am I? Because the answer, if you could ever find the answer, would just you're like everyone else, really. But the really important answer is, well, you belong, you can only define yourself through the context of family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, whoever it might be, that's who you are. And we all contribute. We're all writing each other's stories, we're all contributing to each other's identities. And so it's worth the effort to seek out the community we can belong to.

What's your perception of congregate care, or special places designed for people with disabilities?

People with a disability will often, quite naturally, feel safer in an environment where they're with other people with disabilities and their carers in a in a very protected, socially protected, socially safe kind of environment, where they're not going to feel embarrassed, or humiliated or stigmatised, or any of those things that still happen in the wider community. Now, that sort of enclave mentality, where we must all stick together, is in the long run, not good for us. It's very important to get out into the actual geographical community that you belong to, the neighbourhood that you're part of. It's not surprising that we tend to retreat into these protected groups. People of particular ethnic backgrounds coming into a new community will tend to do it to, they'll feel much more, I mean, Australians travelling to somewhere else, will tend to seek out other Australians and they'll all drink together and sing Waltzing Matilda, and I'm not even going to integrate in the local community. But if we're going to be good neighbours, if we're going to be fully developed whole human persons, it does involve us making connections with the host community that we are part of. So whether the the differences or religious differences or cultural or an ethnic or any other difference including a disability difference. We finally have to break out of the safe place and create links with community. Not that we don't still need the safe place. It's a wonderful place for replenishing our

resources, and building us up. But the breakthrough is when we start making contact with the wider community as well.

What's problematic about viewing some people in our society as a burden?

I think one of the ugliest features of Western societies at the moment, and Australia is a good example, is the people who, for various reasons, are dependent on the welfare state, or are vulnerable in some way, like recent immigrants, or indeed children, who are still in need of protection and education, or elderly people who need Social Security support and more healthcare than other people in the community, or people with some kind of disability. When we start talking about these people, as if they are a burden on the community, because we think they're taking more than they're giving. This is a terrible contradiction of what a human community is, at any given moment. Take a snapshot of a human community at any given moment and some of those people will be contributing more than others, at this moment, take the snapshot 15 years later, and some of those contributors might be for various reasons more dependent. Some of the people who were previously more dependent are now able to contribute more, not necessarily in productive economic employment, but contribute more through volunteering or through participation in the life of the community that enriches that community, these intangible things are huge contributions. And I think, particularly with the very young and the very old, to describe them as a burden on our society is to completely contradict

what we know to be the nature of the human community. And the same with people who are intellectually disabled, people who are physically disabled, people who can't read, and can never manage to learn to read. I mean, these people are part of us. This is the community that we must bring with us. It's no good saying either they're excluded or they're a burden. They're part of us, you know, any given human community will have this full spectrum of abilities, backgrounds, competencies, etc. and they are all part of who we are, we're all one.

What are some of the key questions we should ask ourselves if we want to foster the art of belonging?

I think there are some things we should look in the mirror and ask ourselves some questions about this. The first thing we should always ask is, do I know my neighbours? And if the answer is I don't know my neighbours, then stop whatever you're doing and go next door and introduce yourself to the neighbours and say, "Look, I don't want to intrude, not going to make a nuisance of myself, but we do live next door to each other. I think we should know each other, I'm over here." So that's the first question, make sure you know your neighbours. Second thing, while it's true that most of us are members of many communities and extended family as a community or workplace as a community, special interest groups, communities, the neighbourhood is special. And I think the second question to ask ourselves is, am I contributing

something? That doesn't mean 'economic something'. By my participation, by my willingness to smile and say hello to people, or to always make a point of having a cup of coffee at the local coffee shop every Saturday or something? Am I contributing in a way that enriches this community? Because even though we do have all these other communities we belong to the local neighbourhood is special. And it's special, mainly for the reason that we didn't choose those people. They're not necessarily people like us, and our social development and our moral maturity, as human beings comes from learning how to get along with people, we didn't choose to have to get along with. I mean, very few people if they're thinking of renting or buying a house or a flat in a particular street, very few people will interview everyone in the street to decide whether they could be happy here. You know, these people, like most people, choose the flat and move in, and hope for the best. And hoping for the best means acknowledging that we're a diverse group. There are bound to be some people who we get on well with, some wayward, but we've got to learn to rub along with everyone here because if there's a crisis, it'll become very obvious to us that we need each other. If there's a storm or a fire or a flood or some accident that befalls some family in the street, suddenly we'll know how to be neighbours, and it would be a tragedy, if we only knew how to be neighbours when there was a crisis.

When do you think human beings are at their best?

There's no doubt in my mind that human beings are at their best when they are responding to each other's needs. And

that's what drives a community. A community is not me having a lovely time and getting my own way, I will sometimes, but a community is a place where we're taking each other's needs and well being into account. And all of us are at our best when we're doing that, which is why people who volunteer, for example, will often say that when I feel at my best is when I'm doing something to help someone else. It's not a mystery. It's not a secret. We can all do it.

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