

# Finding connection in a disconnected age

Stories of community in a time of change

Edited by Alex Smith

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nesta



THE CARES FAMILY

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Nesta is an innovation foundation. For us, innovation means turning bold ideas into reality and changing lives for the better.

We use our expertise, skills and funding in areas where there are big challenges facing society.

Nesta is based in the UK and supported by a financial endowment. We work with partners around the globe to bring bold ideas to life to change the world for good.

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## About The Cares Family

The Cares Family brings people together to reduce loneliness and improve community and connection in our disconnected age.

Through North London Cares, South London Cares, Manchester Cares, Liverpool Cares and East London Cares, older and younger neighbours from different backgrounds share time, laughter, new experiences and friendship in their rapidly changing cities.

From 2019, The Cares Family will further amplify the action, voice and power in communities to help individuals, businesses and government to prioritise relationships in their everyday work.

[www.thecaresfamily.org.uk](http://www.thecaresfamily.org.uk)

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**Preface** Christina Cornwell

4

**Introduction** Alex Smith

5

---

**Action** 7

**1. Connecting with more in common** 8

Kim Leadbeater

**2. The simplest of starts** 10

Alexandra Hoskyn

**3. The power of a chain reaction** 12

Mike Niles

**4. For the love of the game, inclusion and unity** 15

Nick Wigmore

**Voice** 18

**5. We can all see and be seen** 19

Ruth Ibegbuna and James Appleton

**6. Something to share and something to learn** 22

Theodora Cadbury

**7. A broader, richer culture** 25

Sade Brown

**8. A more relational world** 28

David Robinson

**Power** 31

**9. A stranger, soon a friend** 32

Hadeel Elshak

**10. The dawn of the citizen business** 35

Jon Alexander

**11. The age of belonging** 38

Will Tanner

**12. A wave of connection** 40

Iona Lawrence

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# Preface

By Christina Cornwell

Our need for social connection is at the heart of what it is to be human. It is as essential to our health and wellbeing as it is to the vitality of our communities and places of work. It has inspired many of the most successful innovations of the modern day. With ever more efficient ways to communicate and transact, many of us have experienced a rapid increase in the number and reach of our personal and professional connections. And yet, despite these growing networks, we find ourselves increasingly disconnected, and many more of us are feeling alone.

The stories in this pamphlet paint a rich and varied picture of the many faces of loneliness and what it means to feel disconnected from those around you. They illustrate how differences – like age, race, culture and nationality – are defining and dividing our communities, and through the writers' experiences, we're reminded of what it feels like to be lonely, particularly at times of change and loss.

But the stories also give us much to be hopeful about. Written by some of the pioneers helping people and communities to connect across the UK, they show us how powerful it can be to share time with others – whether it's a friendly chat in the park or an opportunity to build a deeper friendship over time.

Here at Nesta, we have long shared this belief in the power of connections to improve health and wellbeing. Over the past nine years, we've researched, funded and supported some of the most exciting innovations building relationships, networks and collective change efforts all over the UK.

We've been proud to work with The Cares Family since 2013. We have supported their growth, and they have supported ours. Through their work they have shown that shared experiences and friendship can have a profound impact on both younger and older neighbours. They've reimaged the charity model, demonstrating that when it comes to building connections, the benefits can always be shared.

There is no one single solution to finding the connection we all need, and so we all need to play our part – as governments, businesses and services; friends, neighbours and fellow citizens too. We hope that these stories will help to inspire people to act. Whether we choose to join or create a local group, or simply find more opportunities for conversation as we go about our days, we all have an opportunity to bring connection back into our communities and into our disconnected lives.

**Christina Cornwell** is  
Director, Health Lab  
at Nesta



# Introduction

By Alex Smith

Over the past decade, The Cares Family has been on an extraordinary journey. When I met my 84-year-old neighbour Fred, as a council candidate in 2010, I never anticipated what would happen next.

I didn't expect that he would have the life story he did – one of entertainment, travel, glamour, business and connection. I never expected that through sharing his story with me, Fred and I would become friends – kindred spirits two generations apart and yet with so much in common.

And I certainly didn't expect that, nine years later, his story – and our friendship – would have inspired 15,000 other older and younger neighbours to come together to share time, laughter, experiences and new relationships across the country, sparking a movement of people finding connection and community in a disconnected age.

Fred's story, of course, is unique. Born in Scotland he travelled the world on cruise ships, performing cabaret before settling in London, playing the Palladium, and setting up one of Camden Town's best loved shops. In spite of that lifetime of connection, Fred retired into isolation. When I met him, behind a closed door in Holloway, he hadn't left his house and had barely spoken to anyone in three months.

But Fred's story is in many ways also universal – a tale of love and loss, hope and heartbreak, mischief and misadventure. What I learned through our friendship

is that, regardless of our time of life, or the contours of our living, we all want our short spell on this earth to mean something. And what I learned especially is that this meaning is all around us – in the form of community.

But community does not happen by accident. If we treat it with equanimity or passivity – if we do nothing to nurture it – it can tire and fray. That's particularly the case in our modern age in which once familiar associations and identities are being challenged by a breakneck pace of change. Those once deep, lasting associations – to place, work and unions; to faith, fraternity, even nations – are being replaced by smaller, more transient, more temporary attachments.

Why does this matter? It matters because while three quarters of us believe that community is of fundamental importance to our individual and collective wellbeing, almost exactly the same proportion do not themselves participate. It matters because half of us don't have friends from a different ethnic group to our own, and we are less likely still to have friends in a different class.

It matters because while we are spending more time with our close friends and family than ever before, we are spending less time with our wider communities. Instead we are existing in filter bubbles, withdrawn from people who are not 'like us'. This chips away at our empathy, entrenches

vacuums of power and powerlessness, mainstreams othering, and drives polarisation and extremism. For that reason, isolation is more than a public health crisis. It's a political crisis too.

But there is hope. Because if isolation and disconnection – from different communities, from the meaning of others' lived experiences, and ultimately from our common humanity – is a gateway to so many social ills from addiction, to educational inequality to political extremism, so the solution is simple: strong relationships, community, empathy and trust across perceived lines of difference. The opposite of isolation, it turns out, is togetherness.

And there is hope in this pamphlet too – in the stories of action and how people are coming together in a time of confusion and change; in the inspiring voices of lived experience that in raising up are creating a more equitable future; and in the conviction that power can be shifted from those disconnecting systems and structures and towards people in communities.

For The Cares Family, surfacing more of these stories is just the start. In our work over nearly a decade, we've seen lives changed by the strength of relationships formed across three generations and across gaps of class and culture. Through those relationships, people have felt better connected to the past, present and future; better connected to the shifting world around them; part of something bigger than their own lives.

As we look to the future, we want to help put relationships at the heart of our national conversation and our national life – at the centre of how public services are delivered, how businesses operate, and how space and power are shared. To do that, we need to drive fundamental systems and culture change.

That will take time, but in the next decade The Cares Family will seek to spotlight action that's bringing people together in communities all over the country; to amplify the voices that show why togetherness matters when others might want to drive people apart; and to shift power structures so that they enable, rather than suppress, connection and community.

**Alex Smith** is the Founder and CEO of The Cares Family – North London Cares, South London Cares, Manchester Cares, Liverpool Cares and East London Cares. In 2018 he became one of 20 inaugural Obama Fellows in recognition of his work building communities to reduce loneliness and polarisation.





Action



# 1. Connecting with more in common

By Kim Leadbeater

In June 2016 my life was torn apart and changed forever. I'm still a long way from coming to terms with what happened. When something so horrific and unbelievable occurs, everything you think you know and understand changes. My life will never be the same.

But in those hardest of times, the support I've received from so many people has kept me focused. And it's kept me focused on one thing in particular: bringing people together and building strong communities where everyone has a sense of identity and belonging – always inspired by my sister Jo Cox and our shared belief in humanity and the power of human connection.

Jo was so much more than an MP – to be honest, to me this was way down the list. Jo was a friend to many people; a daughter, a sister, a wife; a mother to two fantastic children; a strong woman and a humanitarian. She believed in a better world, and she fought for it every day. She believed, as I do, in equality, inclusivity and humanity – that people should work together, side-by-side and arm-in-arm, to improve things for everybody, irrespective of our different backgrounds or beliefs.

Before entering parliament, Jo worked all over the world, in war zones and areas of extreme poverty – places where people often had little food or water and sometimes very little hope. But she was determined

to help people less fortunate than herself. Having done this in many different countries, one of the main reasons Jo put herself forward to be the MP for Batley and Spen was to reconnect with her Yorkshire roots and to make a difference to the lives of people in the community where we grew up. And she did this. Even as an MP, she continued to connect with people on a very human level.

After Jo was killed, many people expressed a desire to ensure that the values she stood by, and the causes she championed, were not forgotten. That's why we set up the Jo Cox Foundation – to help build strong, compassionate communities where everyone can feel together. This felt particularly important, and particularly poignant, given the circumstances in which my sister was killed. With division and anger still so evident on our streets, it still feels important, and poignant, today.

That's why I was so inspired by the group of volunteers who came together in Yorkshire in the months after Jo died. Those volunteers – people from every walk of life, strangers to our family at the time but now the closest of friends – would not allow our local community to be fractured.

They are a non-political group who on the surface may appear to have little in common. They were not trained in community organising or in campaigning. We were – and we remain – a strange, somewhat



dysfunctional family. But it works because we are bound by a common humanity and a common purpose: together, borrowing from Jo's powerful phrase, we call ourselves More in Common.

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But More in Common is much more than just a name. It's a philosophy about the importance of connecting people, of reaching out across communities to bridge divides and to make a difference on issues that affect us all.

We acknowledge the changing face of our communities, where people may feel isolated, forgotten or disconnected, because those disconnections are more than just lost ideals; they have real, hard consequences – from physical and mental ill health, to loneliness and, yes, extremism, hate crime and violence too.

**Kim Leadbeater** is an ambassador for the Jo Cox Foundation which was set up after the murder of her sister, Jo Cox MP. She chairs the West Yorkshire More In Common volunteer group and is spokesperson for The Great Get Together, an annual weekend of community events across the UK. She is a self-employed fitness professional and former lecturer in physical activity and health.

That's why our group is seeking to make our villages, towns and cities more compassionate places, where everyone feels as one because everyone shares something: a space, a neighbourhood, a community.

Together, this group of people organises events to bring people closer. In three years, 300,000 people have been part of those community activities – barbecues, picnics, sports days, concerts, afternoon teas, Iftars and street parties – through The Great Get Together. Friendships have been formed, bridges built and communities united. Football and rounders teams have been created. Relationships have blossomed. Our local vicar and imam have become the best of friends: they now go into schools together to talk about the More in Common principle.

This has been quite a journey for me personally. Because like those volunteers who have given so much to what they believe in, I am not a trained community organiser either. I didn't ask for the job of bringing people together, or of carrying the flag for closer, better connected communities. But my family and I have felt the pain of the alternative – of broken dialogue and of the consequences of that disconnection. As a country, we can't continue to let so many people feel marginalised or ostracised. Now, more than ever, we need to fix our broken connections and re-state our belief that we all have more in common than that which divides us.



## 2. The simplest of starts

By Alexandra Hoskyn

I can still remember how it felt. I was a new mum, sitting in cafés around Oldham, whiling away the hours with my baby son. Every now and again, I'd look up to take in the day. And each time I snatched a glance, I noticed how many other people looked as fed up as I felt – not chatting to anyone, distant in a present place. It was that feeling that led me to test my little idea: a designated table where customers could sit if they were happy to talk to other people.

Two years later, I've become aware of the pivotal role that cafés play in British society. They are warm on a cold day, they are invariably open, and most people can afford a cup of tea which can last for a good while. They are somewhere you can go alone and not feel self-conscious. Cafés are a backdrop to villages, towns and cities: they sit there nestled amongst the shops, not given much thought. But when you start to unpick 'the café', you see there's more to them than tea and toast.

In a time when libraries are shutting down, post offices and shops have self-service tills and high streets are empty, the good old café is still there, ever present. So why are they so important? Well, they are a place of connection and real human interaction. You can't underestimate the power of human connection until you don't have it. Someone taking an order or saying 'Morning, love' may seem insignificant, but when you feel otherwise invisible those few words can feel as meaningful as a proper chat. And in those small

interactions, as well as the deeper ones, cafés become crucial to the wellbeing of so many.

Today, that little idea has grown into the Chatty Café movement. We work with retail stores all over the country – big chains and small pop-ins. Our aims are to reduce loneliness and to get people talking. But we knew from day one that the word 'loneliness' should not appear on any of the publicity: it's too heavy, too stigmatised. Instead, we have Chatter & Natter tables with the focus on bringing people together. These tables are aimed at everyone – couples; older people; younger people; carers and the people they care for; people with babies and people on their own.

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In a world full of noise from phones ringing, emails beeping, meetings and all that jazz, those stories and those smiles can lift a person.

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So many of these tables have been places of conversation, of connection and of friendship. 70-year-old Joan and 33-year-old Sarah first met at one of our café tables in Pinner. Joan is a retired teacher and

has a 22-year-old son, whose new girlfriend 'is much nicer than the last one'. Joan and Sarah got chatting over cups of tea. Within a couple of hours, Sarah could have told you more about Joan than she could about most of her work colleagues – because in a café, there's the time and space for a proper yarn.

Of course, not everyone wants to sit at a Chatter & Natter table. But just seeing people connect can be lovely to observe. And that connection can mean so much to people – people like Emma in Manchester who emailed me to say: *"I was waiting for a friend and was sat next to the Chatter & Natter table. I was delighted to hear an elderly local talking to a young lady from out of town, and a man with a baby. They were all smiling and sat there for a good half hour sharing stories. It was wonderful and made me smile inside out."*

In a world full of noise from phones ringing, emails beeping, meetings and all that jazz, those stories and those smiles can lift a person. And for those for whom the noise has stopped, the quiet can feel deafening. Maternity leave; retirement; looking for work; becoming a carer; splitting up from a partner; bereavement – these things happen to everyone,

but can make us feel quite invisible. In that time of invisibility, we need to connect with other people, whether for thirty seconds or for longer – because we are social creatures.

Now, our Chatty Café movement is taking root. We have a formal agreement with Costa which means that every one of their stores can easily be part of it. Not every Chatty Café need be the same. On the contrary – they need to be different, in tune with their environment and led by the communities in which they're based. Sainsbury's have put their own stamp on the idea, trialling 'Talking Tables' in twenty of their supermarket cafés. And universities might one day personalise their tables too – putting out tables 'for students happy to chat to other students they don't know yet.'

In an age of complex digital technology, I'm trying to put the Chatty back into real world spaces, so that people can have a bit of company and conversation with their cuppa – if they feel like it. Because sometimes, the most powerful relationships come from the simplest of starts.

**Alexandra Hoskyn** is a full time Social Worker on a Learning Disability and Autism team in Oldham. She set up The Chatty Café Scheme in April 2017 which she runs around her work and young son Henry.





# 3. The power of a chain reaction

By Mike Niles

It was a day of firsts recently. I had chicken in black bean sauce and my friend tried dim sum: the first time either of us had tasted those dishes. Both went down a treat. We had decided that, as it was the week of Chinese New Year, we'd go out to celebrate Mitzi's 70-somethingth birthday by having a meal in London's Chinatown. A bit extravagant for us; we're normally satisfied with a cuppa and a biscuit. Not to settle for that on this special occasion, though, we followed our meal with a walk around the West End and enjoyed coffee and cake at a fancy Soho café.

Six and a half years after we first met in north London, it's always a privilege to spend time with Mitzi when I'm back in the capital. The time we were introduced to one another was memorable. It was the summer of 2012 and London was euphoric following the fantastic Olympic Games. I was in my mid-20s, spending much of my free time enjoying all the city had to offer. But still I felt a sense of disconnection, as a newbie in town, from those people who had spent their entire lives walking these streets.

I was in the pub one afternoon chatting with a friend and she told me about an awesome new community project aiming to bridge that city disconnect. "*It's right up your street*", she said, and she was spot on –

figuratively and literally. North London Cares paired me with Mitzi, an older neighbour experiencing periods of social isolation, who lived just a 10-minute walk from my flat. Within a few weeks we were laughing and joking, discussing stories of London through the years and listening to music that we both enjoyed, ranging from Fleetwood Mac to Plan B.

Through the years Mitzi became the bedrock of my London experience. As things changed in my professional and personal life, she was always there to support and advise, and hopefully I was able to do the same for her. My position as 'charity volunteer' had evolved into, simply, 'friend'.

I moved back to my hometown of Doncaster in 2016 and, on observing what was on offer across the town, it was evident that we'd closed the door on older people. And then locked them in. Transport links were cancelled, community centres closed, social venues like pubs struggled to survive and the High Street had diminished, completing its migration online. Former mining villages, tight-knit and full of grit, were now places where neighbours kept to themselves as we all busied about our lives, juggling tasks and leaving little time for socialising.

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It's when faced by challenge that we come together. People across my town decided they were not having it. And so, b:friend was born.

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That's not necessarily a criticism; it's just that we've removed the opportunities for people to interact. One of life's small pleasures had always been returning to your car after a shopping trip, having time remaining on your parking ticket and offering your unused time to a fellow parker. *"Hi mate, you wanna use this ticket? There's three hours left on here."* That warm feeling of goodwill as you walked away, slight smile on your face, having saved someone a few quid. Then came automation. Now your licence plate is clocked on camera as you enter and you pay at the machine when you leave – no need to converse with anyone.

Enforced isolation across our communities has a direct impact on people's health and wellbeing. Loneliness, over long periods, is linked to diagnoses of dementia, depression and coronary disease, to name

a few. As technology creeps in to all aspects of our world, spare a thought for those who don't know how to order an Uber; haven't got to grips with booking a doctor's appointment online; or still feel much more comfortable speaking face-to-face with a person, not a machine, when it comes to managing their finances. Their loneliness is compounded as they don't understand the alternatives.

There are over 22,000 people over-65 living at risk of social isolation in Doncaster alone. A quarter don't speak to anyone for weeks at a time. But this is not just an issue facing older people. We are all so close to experiencing loneliness – the loss of a job; a family bereavement; a mate moving out of town. Have you ever accidentally gone a full day, working on an assignment or engrossed in a video game, and realised you've not spoken to anyone? It's a weird feeling. Imagine if that happened for a second day, which became a week, and then a month. We crave time to ourselves sometimes but if you were plunged into involuntary isolation, how would you cope with the indefinite, and all-encompassing, feeling of loneliness?

But it's when faced by challenge that we come together. People across my town decided they were not having it. And so, b:friend was born. Inspired by my

personal experience with Mitzi, it's a charity bringing together older neighbours with local befrienders each week for a cuppa, a chat and confirmation that we're all in this together. Seems like such an easy thing, right? Popping in for a brew on your way home from work or before your weekly shop. What's inspired me, though, is that we've triggered a chain reaction. Friends saw their friends befriending on Facebook, they in turn signed up to help, and the cycle continued. Now, 300 people are feeling friendship that had been gone too long. Just to know that someone is coming, that someone cares and that there's an end to the monotonous silence – that is a meaningful connection that can transform a person's existence.

As our project expands into communities across South Yorkshire, b:friend is part of a wider movement reconnecting isolated neighbours with the people and places around them. In Doncaster, we've worked closely with The Cares Family, borrowing templates and policies; re-crafting a model so that it works for our own community.

But even that wider movement is not enough. Across society, it's time to reintroduce opportunities to

interact with people on a day-to-day basis. In our modern world, disconnection exists everywhere. To fix it, everyone needs to make small changes – saying 'hi' to someone at the bus stop; chatting to the person in the queue at the supermarket; calling your nan for a talk because, try as you might, she hasn't quite got the hang of WhatsApp yet.

We can start by sharing a friendship with an older neighbour. That dim sum order meant a lot. I'm honoured that Mitzi chose to spend her birthday lunch with me (and trusted my recommendation) and still find myself revelling in her tales and quirky observations of London life.

It's reassuring that the government is recognising the widespread nature of the social isolation we face and, while phrases like 'loneliness epidemic' will sell newspapers and stir emotions, I'd prefer to focus on our ability, as communities, to bring positivity back into one person's life, and then another's, and another's – and to believe in the power of a chain reaction.

**Mike Niles** is the Founder of b:friend, a community organisation which started in Doncaster in 2017 and is now expanding to Barnsley, Rotherham and Sheffield.





## 4. For the love of the game, inclusion and unity

By Nick Wigmore

Two young players size each other up, the ball neatly nestled on the ground in front of them. They look each other up and down. One is a foot taller, he's more muscular, stronger, more experienced. The smaller player is aware of his task: to battle in a test of strength and win the ball.

On the coach's command, they tussle for the ball. It isn't long before the stronger player presses home his considerable advantage, dominating control. The smaller player battles hard for over a minute to win the ball back – without success. Sweating, frustrated, disappointed, he looks disheartened.

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Football at its best offers a dedication, pride and sense of belonging that is almost unmatched.

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Then the magic moment the coach is looking for: during the group feedback at the end of the session the bigger player, a 15-year-old refugee from West

Africa, turns to his opponent. He faces the younger boy, a 14-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, and says: *"I love your work man, you never gave up, it was hard against you because you kept battling"* and gives him a big hug. The group applauds. The smaller player puffs his chest out and smiles.

The two are taking part in The Socrates Football Project, which uses football to develop the social and emotional learning and life skills of 14- to 18-year-olds who are living alone in the Moria Refugee Camp in Lesbos, Greece. The camp is notorious for having some of the worst living conditions in Europe. Socrates is run by Dan Teuma, who noticed that – for all the divisions in the camp – the young people were united by their love of football.

This is exactly the type of interaction that the project is trying to enable. These young people have experienced severe trauma, and often have problems with anger, conflict and respect. The project has a curriculum which offers specific social and emotional learning for the players in an environment of love, respect and inclusion. As well as developing football skills and personal attributes, the programme aims to create a brotherhood amongst a fractured community.

This is the power of football in its rawest form. Few other pursuits have the ability to foster and provoke this kind of interaction. Football at its best offers a dedication, pride and sense of belonging that is almost unmatched.

The global game, football is a common denominator almost anywhere in the world. When I travel for work or pleasure, I always try to play football with local people, as sharing the field with them is often the best way of breaking down barriers. Wherever you go, you will find someone who has a love of football, who shares something with you: a reference point, something in common. It might be the same football team, you might like or admire the same player, you might have the same memory of a big match. Football unites.

But football itself isn't a mystical entity to cure every social problem in the world. Football is a mirror of society: where there is racism, sexism, homophobia, corruption, greed and isolation in society, you will find it in football too. If someone is a bully off the pitch, they will probably bully people when they play football.

Football is only a vehicle for good if we deliberately choose to use it that way.

Just this season, as part of the coaching staff at London Tigers (a semi-professional team and community club based in Southall) I've seen players from Iran, Spain, Germany, Congo, Morocco, Portugal, Cape Verde, Brazil and England come together to fight a relegation battle with love and camaraderie, united by the badge, by their commitment to the shirt, fighting for a shared goal.

Unfortunately, the team has had to do so against a backdrop of racial abuse and discrimination from opponents and fans. A true window into the fractured and divided times we find ourselves in.

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Wherever you go, you will find someone who has a love of football, who shares something with you: a reference point, something in common.

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Football used to exist as a community sport, with working class roots and values, with many of the top teams starting out as clubs for railway or factory

workers. As the sport grew in popularity (especially in the early 1990s), the biggest clubs began to focus more on money and power. Top level football is now a multi-billion pound industry, with very little of that money trickling down to community projects and organisations who are using football for good.

Elite football has chosen greed, power and money over community and respect for the fans who support it. And while the fans still feel a sense of loyalty, belonging and devotion to their clubs, it is rarely reciprocated. In football, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, often off the back of the love and commitment of hard working and fiercely dedicated fans.

As those powerful entities get stronger, and those from poorer backgrounds are shunned or priced out of the game they love, organisations which are more community-focussed are vital in providing access to, and opportunities in, our national sport.

This is why it is important for those with power, connections, influence and voice to back organisations like London Football Journeys, Football Beyond Borders and Hackney Wick FC. All of these

organisations work at the coal face of society's biggest problems, using football to inspire. They give some of the most vulnerable people a sense of belonging, with access to mentors and role models who understand their situation.

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**Football is only a vehicle for good if we deliberately choose to use it that way.**

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Like the smaller player fighting to win the ball back from his bigger opponent, those of us working in the sport-for-good sector may never wrestle control of the money, power and influence from the big organisations, leagues and clubs. But we won't stop fighting for those with a love of the game, for inclusion, community and unity.

**Nick Wigmore** is a UEFA B qualified football coach with over 15 years' experience. He uses the power of football to help develop social and emotional learning in young people and vulnerable adults. He is also a senior consultant at Athlead UK which helps professional athletes use their influence to become leaders in social change.







Voice

# 5. We can all see and be seen

By Ruth Ibegbuna and James Appleton

*"This is a picture of the Durham Miners' Gala."*

Newcastle was the third event in our Roots Revealed series. Twenty-five of us were gathered in a cosy, chic space in the back of a café-bar, talking about Brexit, council estates, education and the North East, over lager and chips, wine and canapés. In Manchester, we'd been in a museum room under the gaze of a skeletal T-Rex; in London, a sleek office in the City.

The purpose of the events was twofold. First, to introduce The Roots Programme which this year will launch cultural exchanges between people with radically different life experiences – bursting one another's bubbles to build real understanding of people whose existences they might otherwise never encounter.

The second is to give a taste of that experience to our gathered guests. So far, each city has had a different and characteristic mix of people, and we've conducted engaging sessions to bring out views on the country, its current state and its future.

We'd asked attendees to show a photo that represented their communities – one that they felt captured something about where they came from and what moulded them – and to speak about it for a few minutes. Most photos were of tower blocks or rolling fields, streets and houses, families and friends.

This man in Newcastle had chosen an image of a colourful banner on a sunny day, red fabric with a union lodge name embroidered in gold. As he prepared to speak about it, our politically engaged gathering was ready to hear stories of unionism and scathing rebukes of Thatcherism.

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**We are a society built on superficiality and instant reactions, but most people are desperate to be seen truly.**

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By the time the man had finished speaking, we were all holding back tears. He spoke not about the significance of the Gala on the British and North East's political landscape, but how it made him think about his parents, for whom it had been a key event in the year. He spoke about how he had seen social mobility and changes in aspirations between his grandparents' mining family and his upwardly mobile mother's generation. He told us about his own educational background and how his daughter had just graduated from Cambridge. He said that his mother would have been incredibly proud of her granddaughter. His mum had passed away last year.

At Roots, when we gather people together we neither demand nor expect stories like the one we heard in Newcastle, or numerous others like it. All we do is create a space for conversation. We don't ignore current events – in fact they form a backdrop for every discussion we have. But we foreground people's experiences, upbringings, feelings, their humanity – because that's what makes people who they are.

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**When you look someone in the eye and speak openly about your experiences – and listen to the experiences of others – you can see that genuine connection is still there to be forged.**

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The average person in the UK spends twenty-four hours a week online. We thumb through fired-up tweets, filtered Instagram photos and indulgent Facebook posts. Most are affective or self-aggrandising. They focus on polar extremes of emotion: joy and anger; despair and love. They give us the false impression of knowing people.

But, despite the impression given – not only by social media, but also by a polarised news media and the dispersal of traditional communities – most of us dwell in between the extremes of both emotion and politics. Our existence is nuanced, but there is little opportunity to express that.

Another thing we ask people to do when we meet them is to write a name tag which features a label other people give them, that they don't like. The range has been fascinating and thought-provoking. Sometimes the reason people dislike the labels is that they aren't true, such as the well-spoken, smartly dressed man at our London event, whom everyone wrongly assumed was privately educated.

However, more often, the reason the label is unwelcome is not that it doesn't hold a grain of truth, but more that it pigeonholes the bearer – puts them in a box that affects how people treat them. A Russian man in Newcastle half-jokingly wrote 'KGB agent' on his label, saying that jokes easily transitioned into assumptions and mistrust. A young mixed-race woman in Manchester wrote 'Angry black girl', noting that even when she was angry, a white man would be called assertive in the same situation. An 18-year-old put 'LAC' – looked-after child – and told the group how people formed an instant impression of who he would be, having been through the care system. From the light-hearted to the deeply



moving, the common motif was of people wanting to be understood as more than a category into which they were placed.

At the beginning of our event series, we thought we'd be hearing powerful and under-represented viewpoints on the state of Brexit Britain. And we have heard those. But they haven't been the moments of greatest impact: those are when we see behind the shroud – behind the self-imposed mask of our social media 'brand' or the box that others put us into based on minimal information about our stories.

We are a society built on superficiality and instant reactions, but most people are desperate to be seen truly. This doesn't just affect us as individuals, but also deepens those divisions which have led to toxic conversations about class, Brexit, north and south, immigration and countless other topics.

It's easy to feel bleak about this. Social media and technology will keep growing and each generation

will be progressively more engaged with and dependent upon it. Nonetheless, there is optimism to be found in bars, museums and offices around the country. When you look someone in the eye and speak openly about your experiences – and listen to the experiences of others – you can see that genuine connection is still there to be forged.

The tech innovations of the age can play a part in that – after all, all our events all have been advertised primarily through social media, and those who feel isolated can find solace in the stories that others share online. While we and others keep making spaces for conversation, there is hope that we can all see and be seen.

**Ruth Ibegbuna** is the Founder of The Roots Programme, an initiative bringing together people with radically different life experiences to create more cohesive communities. She was previously Founder and CEO of RECLAIM, a Manchester-based charity focused on developing the leadership skills and critical thinking of working class young people.

**James Appleton** is the Director of Strategy at The Roots Programme and has written several powerful articles about the need to build a more curious and compassionate and hopeful UK.



# 6. Something to share and something to learn

By Theodora Cadbury

*"You are my friend. You're talking about Syria and your mother. I'm also worried about my mother, so we talk about it. That makes us come closer. Your story makes me sad, and makes us closer."*

It's Saturday morning at 10am, and four women (and a baby) are outside the Hackney Museum chatting away while they wait to be let in. They all come here every week, so when the door opens they make themselves a drink and take a seat in the circle, only to get up immediately when someone else arrives to give them a hug and welcome them to the group – whether they've been before or not. When the circle is full and there's a loud buzz of conversation in plenty of different accents and intonations of English, the session begins. There are now more than 20 women in the circle: women who are refugees, asylum seekers, British; migrants from Europe and Africa and Asia and Latin America – but those labels are completely irrelevant here. Xenia welcomes all women.

*"Because I am from another country, I'd like to meet people from other countries, so we can exchange opinions. I've been coming for a long time so I meet new people. When new people come to the UK life is difficult, so I want to help others who are new here."*

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Within these sessions everyone participates as equals – recognising difference in a way that lets connection flourish.

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The first thing we do at a session is introduce Xenia because, as a drop-in workshop, there are always new faces in the circle. We explain that it means 'reciprocal hospitality, love and respect between hosts and guests' (a concept borrowed from the ancient Greeks); we say that everyone is here to help, so it's perfectly fine if you make mistakes with your English; we ask fluent English speakers to talk slowly and clearly and in plain language; and we remind everyone that we're all from different backgrounds so it's OK to disagree, as long as we disagree respectfully. We then break into smaller groups – each with some women learning English and some who speak fluent English – and this is where conversation and connection really flourish, guided by the theme of the day and creative activities and objects.

*"I have lots of friends at Xenia. We are meeting every Saturday at Hackney Museum at 10am until 1pm. We discuss different topics. We have different levels of English, so we help each other and respect each other. Therefore, we become good friends."*

Since its first session, which ran as an experiment as part of Antiuniversity Now in June 2016, Xenia has been facilitating welcoming, open and safe spaces for women to build relationships across perceived divides of language and nationality. We never differentiate based on immigration status or citizenship – all participants come as either English speakers or English learners. Many English-speaking participants come to Xenia because they want to volunteer, but the model breaks down the hierarchical boundary between volunteers and beneficiaries – we still follow Antiuniversity Now's central ethos: 'everyone's a teacher, everyone's a student, everyone's welcome'.

*"At Xenia there is no teacher. If you cannot explain a word or idea completely, someone else will help you explain. We speak slowly and if we don't understand a word we ask, we take our time."*

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**We need more spaces to listen to different perspectives and to try to understand one another respectfully.**

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When you walk into the room as a fluent English speaker, you are welcomed in exactly the same way as someone learning English – with warmth. There will be moments when you are helping to explain an activity or the meaning of words; and there are other times when you'll be taught how to make coffee like they do in Turkey; or listening to someone tell you which of their family members are still in Eritrea, while simply helping them find the words in another language to express what is important to them. Likewise, as an English learner, one moment you'll be taking notes on new vocabulary and the next you'll be explaining Iranian politics, giving advice about relationships or telling someone about what you used to do for work back home. No matter what inequalities exist outside Xenia, within these sessions

everyone participates as equals – recognising difference in a way that lets connection flourish.

*“We learn English, talk about our experiences. Real meaningful conversation, you can discuss something more interesting, you can try to express yourself more confidently.”*

While so much of Xenia is about learning English, it is distinct from formal ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) in that it does not lead to qualifications and is purely about speaking and listening – there is no structured teaching. Formal ESOL funding has been cut by 60 per cent since 2009, which has had a disproportionate impact on women’s ability to learn English – particularly for those who have low literacy, little experience of formal learning, or who need childcare in order to attend classes. ESOL qualifications are an important part of most learners’ progression – particularly to employment – but opportunities to practise English, by having meaningful conversations with fluent speakers, are also vital. Taking place in a community setting rather than a classroom – with the main focus on expression and connection rather than vocabulary and grammar – the conversations can be led much more by the women themselves which leads to a different kind of learning.

*“For speaking in Xenia it’s better than school and classes, it’s no stress. Mixed cultures, we can learn all cultures. When I came first time, little of speaking. Now I speak much more.”*

*Now when I speak with someone I feel happy because finally I understand. Very helpful to have British people [at Xenia] and hear how they speak but slowly and clearly.”*

Sessions are always themed and structured (though going off course is always OK!) and the topics are engaging to participants regardless of their fluency. Rather than focusing on what vocabulary or grammar participants will learn and then finding activities to fit, we gather suggestions from participants as to the themes they might find interesting, then design activities that will make that theme accessible for all – whether it’s New Year’s Resolutions, Mothers and Motherhood, Women We Admire, or Rights and Responsibilities.

Basing the sessions in a local museum means that we can use objects and archives to help navigate conversations, helping participants to feel a part of the heritage of their local community. Having the opportunity to discuss interesting topics with a diverse group of women – often using creative activities, stories and objects to navigate complex themes – is fascinating for everyone, whether you are there to practise English, or to hear a new perspective. We need more of that – more spaces to listen to different perspectives as equals and to try to understand one another respectfully – to help us all to create more welcoming and inclusive communities.

**Theodora Cadbury** is the Founder of Xenia, a programme promoting women-led social integration and language learning in east London. She is also ESOL Coordinator in the Social Integration Team at the Greater London Authority.



# 7. A broader, richer culture

By Sade Brown

The higher up I climbed, the fewer people like me I saw. When I say like me, I don't just mean colour of skin. I am a brown skinned woman, from a working-class background, without a degree, in a leadership position. I mean people like me.

Let me take you back to when I was 17 years old. I had just finished my final and only year in school, I was living independently in a youth hostel, juggling a full-time job in a sweet shop and a full-time A Level schedule at college. I also did a bit of club promoting on the side but that's a story for another day. I knew that something had to give, and I figured it should probably be education, so I spoke to a careers advisor and told her that I had aspirations to set up my own business. She directed me towards administrative jobs, and I wound up applying for a Community Arts Business Apprenticeship at the Bush Theatre. I had no prior experience or knowledge of theatre, but I figured if it had business in the title, it would fast track me and I would get paid at the same time. Win, win.

In the interview, they asked why I wanted the job and I told them I didn't really know much about theatre, but I loved reading books, listening to music and going to the cinema, so I'm sure I would get the hang of it. I now coach young people for job interviews and if any of them told me they said this, I would probably disown them – but here I was, bright eyed

and hungry, with the life experiences of a 30-year-old, but blissfully unaware of the prestigious opportunity in front of me.

I am certain it was the next line that got me the job: 'I saw on your website that you're trying to find young people from the local community. I'm a young person, I've lived here all my life, but I've never heard of you. Maybe I could help you find young people like me?' Bingo. I'd said the magic words.

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**A diverse group of people will outperform a homogenous group because they have a wider range of skills, knowledge and experiences to draw from.**

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It felt like stepping into Narnia. I had lived in Shepherd's Bush my entire life. The O'Neil's pub was a regular spot, but I'd never clocked the bright green door on the side of the building that was the entrance to the theatre. But once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it – and I fell deeply in love with the magic that happened inside.



You see, theatre is an artform like no other. When you produce a film, you refine it until it's done. Every time you go back to experience it again, the film stays the same but you see new layers because you have changed. Theatre, on the other hand, is alive. An audience can change a play, as much as a play can change an audience. I fell in love with the idea that you can change your narrative; that the labels I had lived with, the trauma I had experienced and the relationships I struggled with, could all be written away.

There's a story here about how I struggled to fit in. How I spent the first few years of my career feeling like an outsider. Like I didn't belong there. Like all minorities given a bit of rope, I worked harder than any of my counterparts and didn't stop there. I used my survival skills to adapt to my new environment and fooled everyone around me – even myself – that I really did belong there. I climbed high and fast and through mentorship, great opportunities and a strong faith, I leapt ahead and created a path for the next generation of leaders behind me.

The price you pay for assimilating, though, is that you strip away part of your identity and ultimately leave the very thing that makes you brilliant at the door. I realise now that my diversity is my superpower and by hiding it, I not only denied myself, but I denied everyone around me. You see, the current leadership

in British culture is only reflective of a very slim part of society. It is dominated by people who come from privilege, who are formally educated, pale skinned and mainly identify as male. So, it makes total sense that the work being produced is created through their lens and therefore mostly benefits a small segment of society.

We are changed by what we see, just as we are changed when we are seen.

A year into my apprenticeship I saw a play called Sucker Punch by Roy Williams and a penny dropped. That performance was one of few transformative moments I've had in an auditorium where I've seen a part of my story, my lived experience, played out on stage. I started to seek out more plays like it but found that it was in a league of its own. That is to say, work by black artists was hard to come by.

So I started to write. I wrote about my experiences and how I saw the world, and I encouraged others to do the same. I started to shape a career that gave platforms to anyone who was considered a minority – an outsider, like me. I developed programmes that trained diverse talent and I produced theatre, events and festivals that showcased the best work I could find – that just happened to be made by an underrepresented artist. I had fire in my belly because

I could see the injustice that only a select few got to create and consume art and 'culture'. I am convinced that creativity – not just theatre, but all art – is transformative, that it's a powerful tool to unpack, process and reshape the way we see the world and the role that we play and it's an offence that only a small portion understand this enough to monopolise it.

There has been a shift in the last few years to see more people of colour and disabled artists on stage and screen which I am 100 per cent supportive of. But in truth, I feel like it's sticking a plaster on an open wound. Until we change the types of people making decisions – of commissioning, of casting, of recruitment, of funding – we won't actually change anything at all. Just the face of it.

Until there is a diversity of perspectives coming from different walks of life behind the scenes, we will continue to have a narrow approach and view of what the world actually looks like. It's just common sense: a diverse group of people will outperform a homogenous group because they have a wider range of skills, knowledge and experiences to draw from.

But we can't stop there. It's really easy to hire a few people who look and sound different to you and then expect to see instant results. But it just doesn't work like that. If we want to reap the benefits of having a broader, richer British culture for all to consume

then we need to be bolder and find the answer to why this hasn't already happened. What is it about mainstream culture that is preventing diversity from thriving? And what is my role – what are all of our roles – in addressing this?

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## Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.

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Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.

If the majority of British culture is set up to benefit a small segment of society, then why wouldn't this also apply to the systems, processes and languages used across broader society too? Applying a holistic lens to inclusion benefits everyone – even those who are currently thriving. Only when we truly diversify the experiences we share with one another will we have an equitable playing field with rich narratives that reflect the whole of society, and the true diversity of great British culture. And only then will we know what real community, and real connection, can mean.

**Sade Brown** is the Founder and CEO of Sour Lemons which seeks to increase diverse leadership within the creative, cultural and social sectors. She is also resident social entrepreneur at UnLtd.



# 8. A more relational world

By David Robinson

In 2012, Nelson Mandela famously told a Trafalgar Square crowd that *"vision without action is just daydreaming, action without vision is just passing time, but with vision and action we can change the world."* The Cares Family have found that critical biting point with an idea that works, person by person, place by place. More than that, for me, it is an idea which reflects my own learning – that relationships matter.

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**We now network and transact more than ever, but meaningful time together has been systematically displaced by fast and shallow connections.**

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## Relational poverty

I began my professional life working with young people. I would often arrive early for those sessions, or stay late, talking to the children. They would tell me about their lives – conversations that would in

turn shape mine. I learnt that poverty is about many things; most obviously about money, but also about something else. I was only five or six years older than they were but I was often the only adult with whom they had a proper conversation. They had no other real grown-up relationships. I saw how this 'relational poverty' was linked to three effects:

- An absence of 'cultural capital' – the knowledge and capabilities we acquire from mixing with others;
- An absence of networks – the people who can tell us about a work placement, help us understand the wider world, and be accessible role models;
- And, partly as a consequence of the first two, an absence of belief, confidence and self-esteem.

And I realised two things: first, that the absence of real and meaningful relationships is every bit as aggressive and destructive as material poverty and, second, that the two are inextricably entwined.

## A repeating pattern

Four decades on, I think of those children and of others I've worked with over the years: prisoners

and their families, people sleeping on the streets, young offenders. Each of those people had different circumstances and different problems, but repeatedly unpeeling their troubles has revealed the same picture – of relationships either broken, or never existing to a meaningful degree in the first place. And, equally invariably, the building or rebuilding of meaningful relationships has then been a big part of the answer. It is this experience which underpins my own belief in the importance of real, good relationships.

Sadly, however, I think we are moving in the wrong direction, as do many others. Before the last mayoral election in the capital I led a small project called Changing London – effectively a conversation with Londoners. Social connection, and the lack of it, was the top concern for the largest single group, higher than housing or health or crime – although, as I first learnt from those children, not unrelated to any of these issues.

This reinforced my experience: relational poverty didn't begin 40 years ago, but it has become more widespread and acute at a time when we might have expected it to recede. We now network and transact more than ever, but meaningful time together has been systematically displaced by fast and shallow connections.

In consequence, the quality of our lives has been diminished, with far too many feeling lonely and isolated. Our collective capacity to support one another has been consistently eroded and, perhaps most urgently, our communities have changed. Neighbourhoods, cities and nations are built from the aggregation of countless personal relationships. When these foundational bonds are inadequate, dysfunctional or removed, whole communities are weakened and fragmented. In essence, that which has led to loneliness and social isolation has also led also to distrust, polarisation and division.

This is why The Cares Family is not only a very good idea, but also a timely one, more necessary than ever. But it is not enough.

### Looking forward

As a society, we need to fundamentally rethink how we treat relationships in every setting, throughout the life course. We need to tackle causes as well as symptoms and imagine a place – our place – with relationships as the central operating principle running through everything we do: a 'relationship-centred' hospital, business, school, neighbourhood. What would change?

We know that most things – councils, banks, job centres, shopping centres, class rooms – don't work well when relationships are undervalued, or at least they don't work as well as they could. They have been planned for a smooth process, rather than designed for the best outcome. Systematic transactions are plannable, but warm relationships cannot be so easily reduced to recurring algorithms. It follows that we can only unleash the potential here by reimagining and redesigning from a different, relationship-centred perspective and by involving everyone in the process.

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**Systematic transactions are plannable, but warm relationships cannot be so easily reduced to recurring algorithms.**

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**David Robinson** leads The Relationships Project. Amongst other activities he has previously founded and led several organisations including Shift, Community Links, Changing London and the Children's Discovery Centre.



We need that process to occur not just in government, or in corporations, but in communities up and down the country – with local authorities, small businesses, charities, schools, community groups and individuals all feeling involved and feeling the value of those relationships. That way, we will all be able to build real, reciprocal relationships for the long haul – in good times and bad.

I know these are big questions and that my challenge is a tall order, but it is only by thinking about a different kind of society – a whole society that puts relationships first, consistently and continuously – that we can begin the process of making it happen. Vision and action, changing the world.



A group of diverse people of various ages and ethnicities are posed outdoors. In the front row, a woman with sunglasses and a striped dress sits on a chair, and an elderly woman in a white top sits in a wheelchair. To the right, an elderly man in a light shirt sits on a chair. Behind them, several younger people stand, some giving thumbs up. The entire image has a warm, orange-toned filter. The word "Power" is written in a large, white, serif font across the center.

Power

# 9. A stranger, soon a friend

By Hadeel Elshak

I always viewed the term 'community' as a buzzword. It never really held much personal meaning for me. It was something constantly repeated at school and, later, in sixth form assemblies. But someone talking at you will never truly help you see the deeper meaning of community. For that, you have to experience it.

For me, it was volunteering with Solidarity Sports – working with families and children in my home neighbourhoods in west London – that first gave me that experience. We were all hit with shock and grief when, just down the road, the Grenfell Tower fire happened and we sadly lost Firdaws, Yahya, Yaqub, Nura and Hashim, a close-knit family who were loved by the charity.

Looking back at the few months after the tragedy, it was a time where people were breaking cultural norms and embracing their trust in one another, rather than the power structures that were supposed to serve in the people's interest. The experience strengthened us as people and the community as a whole. It also led to Solidarity Sports setting up The Hashim Family Legacy to honour our friends' lives. Realising that we have power among us – and

rejecting that power could lie over us – is how we strengthened ties with each other.

Living in a society where individualism is the norm, it takes a lot for someone to admit to how reliant we are on one another. We place pressure on ourselves to justify our actions and emotions and if a reason for feeling a certain way doesn't suffice or satisfy, we often suppress the feeling and move on.

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**Realising that we have power among us – and rejecting that power could lie over us – is how we strengthened ties with each other.**

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Maybe that's part of how I'd felt about community when I was at school. But when I moved away from my home in west London to university in Brighton, and I felt lonely for the first time, I gave myself

permission to cry – and then to connect. Because I learned that self-care doesn't just come in the form of physical wellbeing and maintenance. Rather, it comes from creating a mindset in which we can be kind to ourselves – honest, open, vulnerable – and through that to be compassionate towards others too.

Understanding that we can all be lonely, even when surrounded by people, took me some time. At Freshers' Week socials, I constantly asked myself, "*why am I unhappy?*" Naturally, self-doubt can creep in when everyone and everything is telling you these are supposed to be the best times of your life. Initially, as a defence mechanism, I shut myself out from the world I'd entered as I knew I was different to the majority. I was so aware of myself and the lack of similarities I shared with people around me that I felt it would be easier to be on my own. But I soon realised I was focusing on differences rather than similarities, and that this was leading me to further isolation.

Within a couple of months at university, away from that first community I'd felt back in west London, I realised that self-imposed isolation couldn't work – that I needed something more. I needed a sense of belonging and reassurance that I can have a space in

a new, hectic environment. So while I always knew that differences shouldn't be dismissed – that they should be celebrated – I learned that I should also seek community, rather than comparison, in my new world.

I joined societies with like minded people and people from similar areas to mine in London, and with people with different backgrounds and life stories too. I went to the prayer room in between lectures and received 'Salaams'. Finding that community is what cured my homesickness. It gave me hope that I could find a place here. And it gave me an opportunity to learn about other people, and vice versa.

Vulnerability is something I've come to respect and admire in people. It takes a lot for someone to pluck up the courage to have that first conversation. The first person I spoke to at university who wasn't a housemate of mine was a girl on the bus. She overheard a conversation I was having about a freshers' event and asked if she could come. The nerves she tried to hide as she stumbled over her words made me instantly appreciate her genuine nature and the bravery she showed simply to start a conversation. We're close friends now, and we're going to share a flat next year.

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## I soon realised I was focusing on differences rather than similarities, and that this was leading me to further isolation.

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Too often, though, those little interactions can go unnoticed. A 'Good morning' from a stranger can seem so foreign to someone from west London – but on campus, where the nearest town is three miles away, you appreciate the little gestures. To maximise the meaning of those little gestures, we need to change the way vulnerability is spoken about. We need to put ourselves out there, to go out of our way to say a simple hello, abandoning the fear of rejection and 'what ifs?'. Because it can mean the world to someone who is constantly doubting whether they belong.

**Hadeel Elshak** is an activist with charities including Forward and Solidarity Sports, and a writer who has been published on websites including Gal-Dem. In 2018 she won the Media Trust's Breaking Into News prize. She is currently studying International Development at the University of Sussex.

It's those little things that have added to my university experiences so far. What I will remember are the small but significant moments of catching someone from class at the campus shop and sharing snacks, or simply meeting someone's eye and smiling at a stranger. Though we might not always admit it, those moments require bravery. But before long – once we are open with one another, our stories and ourselves – it becomes part of our nature to willingly open up a conversation with a stranger, soon to be friend; and to feel strength and resilience in the power of the collective, of connection and of community.



# 10. The dawn of the citizen business

By Jon Alexander

Here's a challenge for you. Every time you use the word 'consumer' – whether you write it, say it or even think it – you are holding back the shift towards the richly connected, deeply human future we could create. You are reinforcing an idea of humanity that is outdated and inadequate, in your own head and in the heads of those you work with. You are part of the problem; or, more accurately, you are holding back the tide of solutions.

To be able to see this, you have first to know what the consumer really is. You may think it's just a word. But language is never inert: it's the scaffolding on which we build our thoughts, behaviours, values and – most importantly – identities.

This is why the consumer matters – because it's an identity construct. It contains coded within it an idea of who we are, and what the right thing is for us to do. Every time we use it, we are telling ourselves that what is right is to seek the best possible deal for ourselves from the options offered, based primarily on material self-interest, as narrowly defined individuals, and for the short term. Social psychology experiments show that when we expose people to consumer norms, or even to the word itself, we prime reactions

that are more selfish, less open to social participation, and less motivated by environmental concerns. We are telling people not to care. We might not mean to do so, but we are creating disconnection.

This is the challenge that the surge in disconnection levels at the business world. It is simply not enough any more to generate profits, then allocate some of those to easing the challenges of society. The very idea of humanity, on which the modern corporate world has been constructed, must be shifted.

Understood in this way, consumerism started in the mid-twentieth century, initially as a liberating shift. It brought us a revolution in individual agency in the form of freedom of choice, raising standards through competition. The year 1984, with all its weight of literary resonance, beautifully fills out this picture of the consumer as a positive shift – and represents the idea at its zenith. Apple and Virgin, two iconic consumer brands, burst onto the scene. The idea that we could buy stuff to save the planet and solve global poverty was brought to the mainstream by the Body Shop as it floated on the London Stock Exchange, and by Band Aid as it stormed to Number 1. The Los Angeles Olympics, the first ever to be funded by



commercial sponsorship, showed that we consumers could fund global sport and culture too. Madonna even had the poetic decency to cap it off by releasing 'Material Girl'.

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## We might not mean to do so, but we are creating disconnection.

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The unintended price, though, has been disconnection – from the world, from each other, and from ourselves. As a result, we're now living in insanity: all the problems we thought consumerism could solve are in fact multiplying, breeding with one another and deepening around us, at least in the mainstream structures of society; and we respond by continuing to do the same things, expecting a different result.

But here's the good news: consumerism is on its way out and the next great identity construct is on its way up: the citizen. It's happening everywhere, across every aspect of society, and across the world. Instead of just choosing what we want from the options offered and hoping against reason and experience that if we all do that, the best for society as a whole will somehow emerge, we are, as citizens, exploring our moral and creative agency – shaping what the choices are, and finding new ways forward.

It's happening in politics, where it manifests as the usurping of representative democracy by

participatory democracy. It's happening in local communities, where the long simmering of self-organising movements unmistakably approaches boiling point – and power.

Perhaps most importantly, though, it's happening in business, where it manifests as a drastic shift in focus from profit to higher purpose as the ultimate goal and measure of success. Milton Friedman's famous dictum that 'the social responsibility of business is to maximise its profits', is very obviously falling from its perch.

This can be seen in the rise of social enterprise, of shareholder activism and divestment, and in the renaissance of mutualism. It's clear, too, inside individual businesses – as our understanding of human motivation leads us to see that employee engagement must entail genuine participation in shaping organisational culture and purpose. And it's clear in the rise of the B-Corporation movement, where companies commit to using business as a force for good and where profit drives their social purpose.

Patagonia, the apparel company founded by Yvon Chouinard in the early 1970s, has become the poster child of this movement. For Patagonia, people are not consumers, they are peers who share the same passion for nature and the outdoors. This view results in radical business decisions, like the Footprint Chronicles, through which the company crowdsources its supply chain audits, holding itself to high standards of transparency and drawing on the insight and energy of their customers to help them do so.

But it's not just hip companies and snazzy marketing that are showing how success can be built on a bigger idea of humanity. Rooted industrial firms are responding too. Take French gearbox fork manufacturer FAVI, for instance, whose CEO has written a book subtitled 'the enterprise which believes that humanity is good'. When most of its competitors were outsourcing and moving to China, FAVI instead introduced a widespread programme of power sharing across the organisation, including removing not only the clocks that factory floor employees used to check in and out, but also all productivity targets – finding that productivity and quality increased to the extent that they now have a 50 per cent share of their market.

That's the power of the citizen business.

It's important to note just how different this agenda is from Corporate Social Responsibility. Thinking of people as citizens and participants is about harnessing collective power: building agency and connection to communities and the issues that affect them, not selling superficial answers. Far too many brands – even when the aspiration is for positive environmental or social outcomes – still remain complicit in disconnection through communications that say, in effect, 'Shh, little people, just go shopping, we'll sort it.'

**Jon Alexander** is Co-Founder of the New Citizenship Project, a vehicle using the skills of the creative industries to inspire people to claim their agency in society as citizens. Part think tank, part consultancy, the New Citizenship Project has worked with organisations including The Guardian and the Co-op Group.

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If we can seize this moment, this citizen shift, we can create a new, more meaningful, and fundamentally connected society.

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But the tide is turning. We have a moment in time right now. Our challenge is to respond constructively, and usher in the new era with positivity and courage. If we can seize this moment, this citizen shift, we can create a new, more meaningful, and fundamentally connected society. The world of business needs to be part of that, and it needs to start by stepping away from the idea, and the language, of people as consumers – and toward that of the citizen business.



# 11. The age of belonging

By Will Tanner

When people talk of the loss of connection today, Arnold Circus gives me hope. Twenty years ago, the Circus was an unloved roundabout in east London, encircled by burnt out cars and so unkempt that the local school banned pupils from playing there because dirty needles were occasionally found among the weeds. Sitting at the heart of Europe's oldest social housing estate, Arnold Circus' Victorian bandstand stood as a forlorn symbol of community decline.

But in 2004, local people came together to restore it to its former glory. The Friends of Arnold Circus, as they became known, cleared the drug paraphernalia and repaired the bandstand. They employed a gardener, Andy, who still weeds the flowerbeds today, and convinced the council to give them legal responsibility for the space. In a few years it had returned to being a vibrant and well-tended oasis at the heart of east London, playing host to summer fayres and winter concerts – and rooting the local community in its place.

So much is made of the decline in belonging these days that it can feel like social atomisation is an inevitable part of modern life; that our high streets are in a permanent state of decline; as if isolation is now the rule, not the exception; or that local dislocation is the natural consequence of global networks.

It's true that the impact of this dislocation is profound. A quarter of adults in the UK now say they

are often or always lonely – more than in the United States and nearly double the proportion in Japan – and rates of mental illness are rising. Recent Onward polling reveals that 70 per cent of people believe that community has declined in their lifetime, rising to four in five people over the age of 55 years old.

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**This sense of togetherness goes with the grain of human behaviour. People are inherently social animals.**

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But it doesn't have to be like this. It is possible to renew a sense of community even as technology and the modern economy transform our lives, for better or worse – by doing what was done in Arnold Circus twenty years ago and what The Cares Family is doing today: bringing people together in common cause. It's what the American sociologist David Brooks calls the politics of 'love thy neighbour' – and what, in other countries, might be called fraternity or solidarity.

This sense of togetherness goes with the grain of human behaviour. People are inherently social animals. We crave company and gain strength in numbers. Our behaviour is best conditioned by our

duties to others, not our self-interest. And the things that give us independence and security are not financial or material, but the emotional foundations of kinship and community.

But to give this sense of community permanence – to make it last – we must do two things.

First, we need to build institutions to underpin and sustain connection in the face of accelerating change. In Welsh pit towns and northern manufacturing hubs in the 1950s and 1960s, this role was played by Working Men's clubs. In England's towns and suburbs throughout the 20th Century, it was bingo halls and allotments. In rural areas for time eternal, it has been the village shop, the post office or the local pub. These places are community made flesh, but many are fading as globalisation, technology and patterns of work shift how we live. The challenge today is to build new institutions for an increasingly digital and mobile age.

Second, we must create strong incentives to encourage people to come together in a world of full of distraction. This is harder than it should be because, for the past thirty years, we have prioritised individuals over communities. Political debate has held personal rights above common duties and collective obligations. Economists have built models that understand human behaviour through the prism

of the self-interested, profit-maximising individual. Wider social and community value has been forgotten, if not ignored.

If we are to succeed in supporting people to find connection in a disconnected world, we must first remake our political economy with communities in mind – and make connection the path of least resistance.

Thankfully, the sands are shifting. Whether it's concern about the polarising effect of social media, or resistance to gentrification, people and politicians are rising up in favour of the collective. Economists are recognising that social capital matters alongside financial value – so much so that the Treasury recently launched a review of government investment rules. Meanwhile, consumers are exposing their desire for authenticity in their buying habits – just consider the explosion of craft beer and crowdfunding in recent years.

If the last quarter century was the era of isolation, the next may yet be the age of belonging. About time too. The need for Britain to come together, to share our lives, to participate in a community, has hardly ever been greater.

**Will Tanner** worked for Theresa May for three years as a special adviser in the Home Office and Deputy Head of the Policy Unit in 10 Downing Street, where he worked across all areas of government policy. He is now director of the think tank Onward and a columnist at the i newspaper.



# 12. A wave of connection

By Iona Lawrence

After a childhood in rural Suffolk and studying in Edinburgh, I arrived in London eight years ago and threw myself at city life with abandon: I worked hard, played even harder and slept little. So it was in late 2017 that I learned the hard lesson that my friends and family had been trying to convince me of for my entire life: I am not invincible.

Focused on the immediate pressures of setting up and running The Jo Cox Foundation in memory of my friend, I missed the warning signs. It was my neighbour, Glenn, who pointed out that I didn't look quite myself, triggering me to go to the GP. Just weeks later I was preparing for surgery to remove a fibroid from my womb, which I had let go unnoticed for such a long time that it had grown larger than the womb itself. Non-cancerous but vicious in its own way, it had left me bloodless, extremely anaemic and was robbing my organs of oxygen.

Glenn and I had met just a year earlier. I'd moved into a flat with a friend in a housing estate in Battersea, south London. Originally from Jamaica, Glenn had lived in London for decades and owned his flat for

over 20 years. It was once he retired from being a tube driver a couple of months later that we really began to hit it off: my flatmate had a girlfriend on the other side of London and was away with work a lot so it was Glenn who became the constant in my day-to-day life.

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**Loneliness robs us of perspective and causes our closest bonds – and so our safety nets – to fray, leaving us cut out and cut off.**

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I'd totter in and out of the flat at the crack of dawn and late at night, clip clopping down the concrete walkway in my heels, waking everyone up and earning the nickname Michael Flatley – I like to think it was affectionate, but I could never be sure. Every couple of days Glenn would pop his head out to say hi and we'd hang out on the walkway, having a quick catch



up about our days and occasionally sharing one of his delicious but deadly rum cocktails.

I had set up The Jo Cox Foundation with Jo's family just over a year earlier and together we were campaigning hard to raise the profile of loneliness and build stronger, closer communities to tackle it through initiatives like The Great Get Together. But an issue I was so comfortable talking about in meetings with government ministers, MPs and the amazing charities that made up The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission, was one I was ironically reluctant to talk about personally. The complex struggles of running an organisation for the first time and my deteriorating health left me feeling inadequate, unable to cope and isolated.

For millions, this is a familiar story. Loneliness is the chasm that opens up when the social connections we have aren't of the quality or quantity of the connections we need or want. 14 per cent of people feel often or always lonely – with those aged 16 to 24 feeling most often and most intensely so.

Loneliness robs us of perspective and causes our closest bonds – and so our safety nets – to fray, leaving us cut out and cut off. In our communities, disconnection can undermine integration as people disengage. Eating away at empathy, solidarity is eroded and dislocation creeps in.

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**What links all these stories is the belief in the power of human relationships.**

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Humans are social beings, so loneliness is a challenge as old as humanity itself. But globalisation, gentrification, digitisation and automation are playing havoc on the way we connect at home, at work and during leisure time. We share fewer family meals; increasingly connect online instead of face-to-face; increasingly work outside of traditional team environments; increasingly shop online; are less

faithful and religious; and are less likely to belong to a trade (or any other kind of) union.

But as the voices in this pamphlet show, it's not all doom and gloom.

There are millions of individuals, groups, communities, charities and businesses across the UK working tirelessly to bring people together by creating spaces and places for relationships to thrive. These people are building a new social infrastructure: blowing away the cobwebs of loneliness with everyday conversations and enabling people to do what people do best – connect.

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## Human relationships matter and they matter enormously in times of challenge and change.

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What links all these stories is the belief in the power of human relationships. And it's those relationships that unleash the power of what Jo Cox passionately

**Iona Lawrence** has been with The Cares Family for the past ten months, developing new ideas to bring communities together. She was formerly Founding Director of The Jo Cox Foundation.

articulated in her maiden speech in parliament: the belief that we have more in common than that which divides us.

In supporting Jo's family to build her legacy we knew that government had a role to play in leading the shift towards stronger connections and I'm proud to have played a part in the work her colleagues Rachel Reeves MP and Seema Kennedy MP and The Jo Cox Loneliness Commission led in lobbying for the appointment of the Minister for Loneliness. But real connection, and real community, exist miles from Westminster – in the neighbourhoods, experiences and stories of people being with people. This pamphlet is just the tip of the iceberg.

Human relationships matter and they matter enormously in times of challenge and change. Each of the moments of connection described in this pamphlet might feel random on their own, almost a mistake or a by-product of something else. But taken together, they show that there is a ripple of connection that is stronger than the forces that are atomising communities. It's our job to turn that ripple into a wave.







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