

Letter to my neighbors, Part 1

Neighbors, sorry I have been out of touch for some time. It is good to be back.

For the past year, if you are like me, you have been thinking a lot about both the vulnerability of our neighborhood and the state of our national politics. This reflection has led me to the following, perhaps surprising, conclusion: We all need to rethink our roles in our neighborhood and the role of our neighborhood in our city and beyond. Let me try to explain how I reached this conclusion.

Let's begin with the fires that have devastated some of our neighborhoods. I think we all came away from that experience with a deeper understanding of the vulnerability of our neighborhood and a deeper appreciation of how important neighbors helping neighbors will be to our ability to survive and recover from a fire or an earthquake. The fires also made me realize on a deeper level the importance of being organized and prepared for a disaster. For years our neighborhood association has been working on disaster preparations at the block and neighborhood level and we have a pretty good idea of what we need to do, but the fact is that we have not been able to sustain this effort long enough to really prepare adequately for a disaster like the recent fires. These reflections on the fires and our vulnerability were first to lead me to conclude that we all need to rethink our roles in our neighborhood: Are we putting the time and effort needed to address the vulnerability of our neighborhood and really prepare for the next disaster?

This conclusion seems pretty straightforward. But I want to also suggest that the state of our national politics is another and equally compelling reason for all of us to rethink our role in our neighborhood. This will take some more explanation.

For the past year or so, we have all become more aware of the deep and growing divisions in our nation. These divisions have undermined our ability to find common ground and work together to meet the challenges we face. We seemed to have stumbled into a real crisis in our politics that is challenging our basic democratic norms and posing a real threat to our democracy and our democratic way of life. If you are like me, this has added to your deep sense of vulnerability. We now know that we are vulnerable to both natural and political disasters.

If we honest about it, we know that the deep divisions in our nation are mirrored right here in our own neighborhood, in our city, and in our state. They may not be as apparent here in California since we have a dominant majority culture, but they are there. In our own neighborhood, we know that we have not created the kind of community where people get to know each other, especially people with different backgrounds and experiences. We have not created a community where we have a chance to exchange ideas, learn from each other, find common ground, and most importantly, work together. Nor have we created a way for us to exchange ideas and work with other neighborhoods across the city. It is just this lack of a strong community that knows how to work together in our neighborhood, and most neighborhoods across our nation, that has created the foundation for the divisions and dysfunction in our

national politics. Since we don't really know our neighbors, we are all vulnerable to politicians willing to define our neighbors for us and exaggerate our differences to support their own agendas and power. And, most frighteningly, we now seem to be stuck in the status quo with no real sense of how to overcome the political crisis we face.

That we have reached this point in our neighborhood and in our national politics should not come as a surprise to us. Our current political crisis is the consequence of long term trends in our nation that have hollowed out our democracy. We have been moving for a long time now from government "by us" to government "for us", gradually delegating our political and community responsibilities to our governments and, for many of us, restricting our involvement largely to voting. When we do get involved, we mostly join with like-minded people in large issue-oriented groups and organizations run by professional staff. Our efforts are directed at petitioning and pressuring governments to meet our demands. While there is certainly a place for this kind of involvement, it is clear now that it is not enough because it has led us to become a deeply divided nation unable to recognize the common ground that we all share. We have not taken responsibility for our neighborhoods and communities, taken time to get to know our neighbors and learned how to work together to strengthen our communities. Democracy is a skill as much as a belief and we have pretty much given up on the practice of democracy that we all need to make it work.

Given the state of our politics and the history of the hollowing out of our democracy, it seems clear that we are faced now with the daunting task of rebuilding our politics and reclaiming our democracy. And that brings us right back to our neighborhood, the Junior College Neighborhood, Santa Rosa, California. Rebuilding our politics will have to be done from the bottom-up, neighborhood by neighborhood. If we want to repair our politics, we will have to create democratic communities in our neighborhoods and cities and make them places where we can relearn democracy. This has made me realize that the work we can do, not in Washington, Silicon Valley or Sacramento, and not even down at City Hall, but right here in our neighborhood to strengthen and build a democratic community may be some of the most important work we will ever have a chance to do. We, us, the people who live right here in this small part of the world-- are quite possibly the key to finding a way out of our national political crisis. It may actually be up to us to figure out how to adapt our democratic ideals to make them work in the 21st Century. Is that enough reason to convince us that it is time for us all to rethink the roles we playing in our neighborhood? And, don't forget about our need to prepare for the next disaster.

There may be another, and perhaps more appealing, way for us to view our current situation not only as a response to the natural and political threats to our community, but as an opportunity for us to create a very special place to live and do creative work. Just imagine for a minute if we were able to create a community where we actually got to know and respect each other and were committed to working together to maintain and improve our neighborhood. A place where people from very different political perspectives and very different backgrounds -- renters, homeowners, young, old, all races and ethnicities—all treated each other with respect, listened to each other, found common ground, and worked together. We would celebrate our

differences and find ways to learn from our different experiences to create new ideas and do creative projects. Wouldn't that make our neighborhood a great place to live? And wouldn't that be the kind of democratic community that would be an expression of our democratic ideals and aspirations?

Creating that kind of neighborhood community with engaged neighbors who know how to work together would also give us the potential to do some great work. We, us, right here in our neighborhood, could --you fill in the blank-- create the nation's first carbon neutral neighborhood, create great affordable housing that would ensure the diversity and strength of our neighborhood for the future, create great schools, build the support network that would enable seniors to stay and prosper in their homes, provide summer employment for our young people, create community gardens, build a center for and controlled by our youth, organize an annual 4th of July parade and picnic, build a coffee shop for parents with young children to gather....

Just as importantly, working on neighborhood projects would give us a chance to escape from our hierarchical work lives to be a part of a democratic organization where we had an equal voice in determining all aspects of the work. It would be chance for our families to work together on a project and for our children to work with us and learn how to work together in a community. It would be a community that our children would help to create and want to spend time in. And maybe a community that our children would actually want and could afford to stay in.

Doesn't all that sound like an opportunity that we should grab hold of?

Yes, you are probably thinking, all that sounds good, but it is just not really a realistic alternative in today's busy world. Who would have the time to do all that it would take to build this kind of neighborhood community? First, I would say that we need to keep reminding ourselves of the difficult and essential historical lesson that democracy requires participation. Democracy provides us with the best chance to lead engaged and creative lives and it has proven through history to be the best provider of both security and prosperity, but it does have a cost. To get the benefits of democracy requires all of us to participate in its maintenance. So, the question we should ask is: Can we find a practical plan that can get us from our current fully occupied lives back to the work to create a more democratic neighborhood, a neighborhood that both responds to our national political crisis and begins to create the kind of community and neighborhood we can be proud of?

Coming next: Some thoughts on a practical plan for us to get started.

Letter to my neighbors, Part 2

The question left from Part 1: If we do decide that we want to prioritize our neighborhood work, is there a realistic plan for already busy neighborhood volunteers to build the neighborhood community we need? What would we do and who would do it? I will try, using the experience of your neighborhood board over the past ten or so years, to give a preliminary answer those questions. I think my answer will show that it can be done, but the answer will just be a rough outline. It will take a lot more experience and many more of us working together to really figure out how to do this.

But, first, so we understand the scope of this task, let's go over some relevant facts about our neighborhood. As neighborhoods go, the Junior College neighborhood is unusually large. Our best guess is that it has about 5000 residents living in about XXX households. Your board members have sometimes thought that maybe we are too large for a neighborhood, but to some academics who have studied small communities, 5000 is about ideal for a well-functioning strong community. It is small enough for people, with the right opportunities, to actually bump into and get to know each other and large enough to have the diversity and resources and some great projects.

If you think about it, our neighborhood is similar in size to many small towns. Towns our size were even more prevalent in the early years of our nation when we first developed our ideas about and practice of democracy. And, guess what, small towns our size all had, and still have, full governments working to bring people together and build community. Communities our size that are part of larger towns and cities no longer have their own governments. This did not happen by accident. Neighborhoods, starting in the beginning of the 20th Century, gradually ceded responsibility for the places they lived to central city governments, all in the name of better and more efficient management.

Whatever the history that got us to where we are today, the fact now is that if we want to create a strong neighborhood community, we will need to rely on volunteers and a volunteer neighborhood organization to play the role of a small-town government and find ways to strengthen our community and build our capacity to work together.

Based on our association's experience, there are two keys to making this kind of volunteer effort successful. The first is obvious, we will need enough volunteer neighborhood leaders so that we can share and spread out the work so that it can be done by neighbors who already have work and family obligations. And, second, our neighborhood leaders will need to share a common vision for a democratic community, understanding that the secret to a strong community is its ability to include and respect the voice and role of everyone. We need leaders who are not just interested in mobilizing people around issues important to them, but also understand the need for leaders to facilitate everyone working to find common ground on issues important to the neighborhood. Our volunteer leaders will need to understand that doing their work in a way that builds a strong and inclusive community is the key to actually having the ability to be able to mobilize people to get things done.

So how many volunteer leaders will we need to create a sustainable effort? My best guess, based again on Association experience, is that, to build a great neighborhood community, we will need about 40 or 50 volunteer leaders who are willing to spend a couple hours a week – occasionally more on the days of special neighborhood events. If we can keep finding new volunteers to take their turns as an active community leader focused on our neighborhood, our volunteers wouldn't need to make a lifelong commitment, just a commitment for a year, maybe two. 40 or 50 volunteers may sound like a lot, but that is actually only around 2% of the adults and teenagers volunteering in our neighborhood in any particular year. If that seems possible, then we know it is a question of our priorities, not our capabilities.

Consider this estimate of 40 or 50 volunteer leaders in light of recent past years of your association. Right now, due to unexpected illnesses and job changes, the JCNA has at best about 10 active volunteers, all of them on the board. A couple of years ago when neighborhood association and activity were growing, we had maybe 20 volunteer leaders working on various projects, but even then, we were still struggling to maintain the work with the number of volunteers we had. 40 or 50 volunteers would really give us the capacity to engage the neighborhood, sustain the work, and create the community we need to do some great things. Remember, there are a lot of us living in our neighborhood who are engaged and doing important voluntary work outside our neighborhood. I am not including them in the 40 or 50 volunteers we need only because they are not focused on building our neighborhood community.

What would a neighborhood organization with 40 or 50 volunteer leaders look like and what would they do? First, we would need 10 or 15 volunteers for the neighborhood board that is elected at our annual meeting. The board would have the overall responsibility for be coordinating all neighborhood activities and for building our neighborhood community. It would be responsible for communication within the neighborhood, for the organization of regular neighborhood meetings and events such as our summer picnic and holiday party, for responding to neighborhood needs as they come up, for organizing meetings and discussions to find common ground on city and neighborhood issues, for sharing ideas with other neighborhoods, and for mobilizing the neighborhood voice and resources to address city-wide issues. We may even decide that we need more than one board or council to better include renters, youth, elders and others. If we do we may need more that 10 or 15 board volunteers.

In addition to this very active board, we will also need three teams to focus on projects that the neighborhood has identified as its priorities. Projects like preparing for an earthquake or fire, building housing for the homeless, addressing climate change, establishing a farmer's market, planning for affordable housing, creating a youth center and organizing summer employment for neighborhood youth, building a community garden, or a coffee house for parents with young children, or organizing support for elders to stay in their homes, etc. Three project teams with 10 volunteers each, plus the board, adds up to 40 or 50 volunteers. We have tried multiple times to start project teams with fewer than 10 committed volunteers and we have learned that they just are not sustainable –too much work for too few volunteers.

Our emergency preparations team, probably our neighborhood team that has been organized for the longest time, provides a good example of what the work of these project teams would look like. When it was most active, this team, met about every other week, developed a plan to prepare the neighborhood for emergencies and implemented their plan. They applied for and got a grant for emergency medical supplies, they worked with the medical professionals and the First Presbyterian Church to establish a medical triage station and shelter for the neighborhood, organized a neighborhood open house at the Church with information on all aspects of emergency preparations, and began the work to establish a means to communicate within the neighborhood using hand held radios and outside the neighborhood by ham radio. The team work with and got the support of outside groups like the fire department, other neighborhoods, PG&E, and the Community Advisory Board to do its work.

Imagine that our emergency prep team, bolstered with new volunteers, continues and that we also had two other teams, one that was able to engage a hundred neighbors to build small homes for homeless, place them in the neighborhood, and organize the support necessary to ensure that they succeeded. And we had a third team, working to bring neighbors together to find common ground on a neighborhood vision for affordable housing, a vision that would ensure the quality and diversity of our neighborhood for years to come, and then began work with developers to implement our vision.

And imagine that these teams, like all of our neighborhood project teams, would be organized to mobilize the neighborhood to work together to accomplish something, not to do the work for the neighborhood. Together, each of our three project teams, would mobilize hundreds of us, neighbors, and bring our energy, ideas, and skills to accomplish neighborhood goals. It is these projects and the work that we will do together to address neighborhood priorities that will really allow us to get to know and trust each other and build the foundation for a great neighborhood that we can all be proud of. We will learn that we do have more in common than we think and that our differences can be turned into an asset to improve our work.

In reality, it may take us a couple of years to reach the level of 50 active neighborhood leaders with a strong board and three simultaneous projects. We could start this year with 20 or 25 volunteers for a strong board and one team and let the enthusiasm and interest grow year by year. That would be fine.

So, let's get started with this work. Think about these ideas, talk with your neighbors about rethinking our roles in the neighborhood. Then plan on becoming one of the neighborhood leaders we need. Think about whether you want to be on the board or on a project team. Then come to our annual spring meeting to help us identify our priorities and be ready to volunteer. Then get ready to make some history: If we succeed we will join a long line of those before us who have worked and sacrificed to maintain a democratic way of life; we will help to create the response to the divisions and dysfunction of our current politics; we, us right here in the Junior College neighborhood, will be able to legitimately claim to be some of the mothers and fathers of democracy for the 21st Century.