

How do we calculate the value of positive proximity? How do we quantify it? This is how I measure it: what I saw in Gainesville, with the police and the teenagers, was a living laboratory, an effort to realign conventional law enforcement toward community peacekeeping, a bridge at once as powerful and fragile as a strand of DNA in one of our healing, human, American cities. I calculate the strength of positive proximity by the things communities do that bring power and life to the commons even when they're hard to organize and sustain.

Other examples? Three hundred people showed up on a cold January night in Beacon, New York, to demand the resignation of a school superintendent who everyone agreed, after many conversations in all the spaces throughout Beacon, was driving the schools into the ground.

Over on the shores of the Finger Lakes, hundreds of people showed up, too, countless times, in snow and sleet, to protest the plans of a company that kept changing its language (and its name) to achieve its goal of storing liquid gas in precarious salt caves. The community's response to the company's ever-shifting narrative was not fatigue. It was more protesters, three hundred of whom got arrested making their point. Phoenixville, Pennsylvania's cultural institutions are all expanding, and they are in dialogue, confidently so, with developers building apartments where the iron and steel buildings once stood. The citizens are abreast of the coming changes, and they are ready to, as Robin Groff in Moab said, "manage" it, not just arbitrarily embrace or reject what's coming.

Wesleyan University, increasing its commitment to an ongoing presence in Middletown, Connecticut, just signed a deal to have its main bookstore on Main Street, two blocks farther from the campus. The positive proximity built over two decades of mutually respectful partnerships will have a new address for mutual translation in the future.

The proof of positive proximity is also displayed in the ability of towns and cities to increase in complexity and in the number of points of access for their citizens while ultimately building a cohesive identity. Strong positive proximity allows us to survey the terrain and "know" what the reserves of social capital are and proceed to understand what our towns can handle and what they can accomplish.

As a traveler I can sense positive proximity pretty quickly. Are there posters for strange, funky events, like the Frozen Dead Guy festival in Nederland, Colorado (complete with frozen wet T-shirt contests)? Are there signs at all? Are there helpful pedestrian bridges over highways (Minneapolis, Minnesota), over streams (Phoenixville, Pennsylvania), and over railroad tracks (Roanoke, Virginia) to physically connect every part of the city? Are there social bridges between people, such as dog walkers who say hello to each other and stores that put out free coffee?

I'm guessing you might have questions about your own town or city. How are you doing? How can you grow? Where do you begin? The way to start is to find something that interests you, such as the unique foods that grow where you are, the history of your town and its peoples, architecture that can be brought back to new life, or streams that are only a few discarded truck tires away from being a gathering place instead of an eyesore. Also, if you look around, you'll find people already committed to growing the positive proximity of your town. I guarantee there are some.

When we let our curiosity and interests, and a little trust, lead us outside our doors and onto the village green, we will flourish as citizens and so will our towns. We don't just feel good today or tomorrow when we become involved; we accumulate a sense of meaning. We will always have the challenge, individually, of facing every new day, but we can be guided by a trustworthy compass when we have a sense of who we are in relationship to where we live, when we know how to find out what's afoot and how we can have a role in it, when we live and breathe with a sense of positive proximity. When we get out of bed in the morning, if we have positive proximity, we don't have to go too far to figure out where the day might take us. We just have to make it

to the mirror, where we recognize ourselves as citizens, or look out the window, where we see a world in which we belong. Where to go from there, I suggest, is to bridge whenever possible. Find the retired citizens who might very well be standing at the periphery wondering where and how their time could be best spent.

Enlist the schools, the library, the differently abled communities, and local businesses for the sake of coalition building, which will influence the success of other projects as they help build the foundation of your town. Yes, there might be that first “No,” but give collaboration a chance. I have learned how to get past the threshold of “No.” And if there’s a wall just past the threshold that can be a valuable sign your town isn’t quite ready for what you have to offer. You might have to find a different way into the public square. So first off, start with yourself, and second, bridge from there. I am reminded once again of the recommendation by Robin Groff in Moab to manage change. New technologies, ideas, and demographics will always be passing through your town. If you embrace change fatalistically, you might end up disliking its outcomes. Not every army coming up over the hill is a friendly one. But if you resist change wholesale, you might find yourself behind the times for no good reason, caught up in blame, resentment, and frustration.

How might your involvement in the community both allow more voices into the conversation and ease your own way into the future? Managing change can mean the active struggle to save beautiful, old buildings and preserve sacred groves of trees. It can also be a decision to raze a lead-paint-and-asbestos-riddled structure and start anew. It also means not thumbing your nose at tourists or new businesses. There are ways to invite tourists to appreciate who you are. There are standards that businesses should meet to fit the look and feel of the town. As citizens, you know better than I do what makes you special and how to balance your identity, and even drive it, by managing change. Another question we can ask is, “How can I find and support the translators in my community?” Translation and conscious bridging can occasionally be challenging if they must be created out of thin air. Although every town can dig in to find its past, start an open mike, or build paths to its waterways and waterfalls, it’s more difficult to recommend what to “do” to cultivate translators, be they the individuals who build on the strength of weak ties by connecting networks to networks or the outstanding conscious bridgers I’ve described. But we can identify them and define our relationships with them. We can find our own translation skills as well.

And what is my own personal story? I try to be a bridger, but the truth is I’ve often found it’s hard to introduce myself to people. I am a public person. My work involves meeting new people for a week at a time (leading songwriting retreats) and even a night at a time (in about seventy-five performances a year). So why should I have any social anxiety at parent-teacher night at school, or at my kids’ camps, when I encounter a new face? There’s an unspoken barrier that keeps me from saying, “My name is Dar, like car with a ‘d.’ I’m Stephen and Taya’s mom. I hear your son is a *Star Wars* aficionado . . .” (and so forth).

As I started to learn the importance of bridging social capital in communities, I started trying to introduce myself to people more. I experience a strange feeling of exposure and commitment when I do this. Will we start talking about something that I don’t know about or that bores me? Does this person know who I am and dislike me? Do I have to hug her or him? These are irrational thoughts, and they are surprising for me. I am, no doubt, a *social* person, and I always have been. When I was in kindergarten, I had to get off the bus last, leaving me alone with the bus driver. He terrified me. So I talked to him. I asked his name and if he liked being a bus driver. His name was Lou, and he pleaded the fifth about his job. But now he had a name, and it wasn’t Charles Manson (my sister had a copy of *Helter Skelter*). There have been so many slogans, such as “Be the change you want to see in the world” and “Practice random acts of kindness,” that prescribe individual strategies for making the world a better place. Even “Buy local” is something you simply do as an individual. All of these personal acts are valuable. But this is not a book about the power of one.

Translating ourselves, in an open and open-ended way, can be anxiety producing, and yet the habit of introducing ourselves to people around us can amount to a more solid, less fearful way of being in our communities. I would recommend, just from having met hundreds of shy volunteers at concerts over the years, that if you are uncomfortable about conversation, you can still bake, organize, or offer to find uniforms for a local sports team on which you or your children play. We can all extend ourselves, even without words, and these individual expressions will add up.

Right now my town is wrestling with negative proximity, which has put all of our translation skills to the test. Despite the presence of all the funny, smart, accommodating citizens around me, not to mention the fact that we have every town-building asset I've discussed in this book (a deep history, gorgeous scenery, and Hudson Valley food tourism, to name a few), I got a real lesson in what can happen when a large entity comes in to tear down any kind of unique, interactive identity a town has started to assume.

A developer wanted to build an enormous complex on the outskirts of town, and the local newspaper embraced his cause, or seemed to. I say "seemed to" because if I say the editors were all-out boosters for the developer, I would be threatened with a lawsuit. Again. There was an election in which both boosters and skeptics of the development participated. After all the votes were in, not one schism had been left unwidened: new citizens versus settled, Democrat versus Republican, older versus younger, and even pro-gun versus more gun control. Worse than that, the paper advanced a narrative of division in general. People were saying they loved living here despite being "divided."

The town seemed to be in tatters. Many citizens felt humiliated and intimidated. The paper and/or its owner's spouse had threatened lawsuits against at least five citizens. Residents of our town were scared, demoralized, and anxious about legal threats. A friend who runs a poetry series protested by not submitting a press release to the paper but then feared retaliation against her nonprofit, her poetry series, and her family. It was like that.

I was already writing this book, and I thought, "What would a person who wanted to build positive proximity do in this situation?" I looked for the broadest common denominators. I wanted to put together an event that was just fun, not targeted at anything particular about our town. I thought of Rabbi Brent and the broad swath of community members meeting across the bounds of their constituencies. I came up with the Beatles. Everyone loves the Beatles. I proposed a Beatles sing-along in the parish hall of the church in the center of the village. Our town is filled with harmony-seeking musicians and artists. As soon as I put out the word, four musicians set up the rehearsals, another friend said he'd lend us his sound system, other friends offered to bake, and another said she'd take care of my kids at the event. Two months later we went into the parish hall. About two hundred people showed up, of all ages and with differing views on the development project. We put lyrics in PowerPoint and projected them on the wall. One teacher brought a basket full of shakers for the kids. About half the kids played and danced, while others ran around outside on the church lawn.

I saw the town I knew from ten years of living there. Old and young, new and settled, all political backgrounds, all of us happily leaning in to our collective experience. The event wasn't necessarily a driver of positive proximity. It was the reminder that we still had it. The development is happening. We'll live with it, but what we can't live with is the sense that we are a "divided town." Perhaps we can start to act like Ellie Kinnaird, who, when she became mayor of Carrboro, "decided to have fun." Our town is like a treasure chest, or at least a costume chest.

Thinking about Phoenixville and the way in which acknowledging its retired citizens proved a boon to the whole community, and recognizing that our retired citizens had been particularly targeted in the paper's narrative of "division," some friends and I wanted them to know we valued them, so we organized a "remembering" event at the library. We randomly chose the year 1955. We invited people to come tell stories from that time that were fun and educational for our kids. We printed out ads and pictures from that year, when Play-Doh officially became a toy (instead of wall spackling) and McDonald's opened its doors. We made the Hershey official chocolate cake of 1955 (it was strangely awful: I was the one who cooked it. Operator error?). We had an iPod mix of hit songs from the year, and an art teacher and his family made a fantastic foldout display of old 45 records. Their daughter, Rowan, researched and told us the events from that year and then proudly held up a picture of her grandmother, who was an Olympic skater later in the decade.

Nancy was the emcee and knew everyone. There were only twenty-five kids there with their parents, and about ten senior citizens, but we filled the room. For all our quaint window-dressing of the event, the stories themselves and the people who told them were the stars. Some people prepared stories and spoke; others just piped up.

Bob got up and said that when he was growing up, he had a relative on every street, given all the intermarriage between the large families in the region (many of which are still here). He said it was like a “big party,” and he said, with emotion, that he wished the same for everyone in the room.

Another woman, who had recently had a stroke, sat and prompted her daughter to tell stories of her attendance at a one-room schoolhouse on a hill, where they sledded on their backpacks during lunch every day in the winter. She was able to say a few things herself. When one kid asked if a one-room schoolhouse felt small, she simply said, “It was wonderful.”

The stories devolved beautifully into the years before and after 1955, with memories of the car dealerships, the soda fountain at the drugstore, and drag racing across the Hudson River when it was covered in ice. We learned from this event about what we would do next: ask more people to prepare stories. Invite high school classes. We will have another remembering event. The kids loved it.