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Introduction

IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, on one of five summer Fridays in 2018, hundreds of people could be seen enjoying a free jazz concert at the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library. The music series “Five Free Fridays of Jazz” highlighted jazz musicians from across the city. In total, over five thousand people attended the series. The concerts brought together a culturally and racially diverse crowd in a city that has suffered from a long history of racial and economic segregation. The series was a programming effort of Memphis Public Libraries in partnership with the Levitt Shell (now Overton Park Shell) amphitheater, and for many attendees, it was their introduction to the library. The events provided an excellent opportunity for library staff to highlight many of the other great offerings of the library. A common refrain of visitors leaving the event was “I didn’t know libraries offered *this!*”

Public libraries have long been champions for literacy and lifelong learning. They stand on the front lines of fighting misinformation



Memphis Public Libraries hosts Five Fridays of Jazz at its Benjamin L. Hooks Central Branch. (Source: Keenon McCloy)

and disinformation by providing reliable resources and assisting citizens in finding verifiable and accurate information.

The public library has always evolved to meet the needs of the community. In 1905, the bookmobile was introduced as a way to reach more children. The first one was on a wagon drawn by horses at the Washington County Public Library in Maryland.¹ In 1982, computers were made publicly available at the Mastic-Moriches-Shirley Community Library in New York.² This would pave the way for libraries to evolve into multimedia centers, offering not only books but also audiovisual materials, digital resources, and Internet access. Forces such as societal changes, technological

advancements, new approaches to lifelong learning, and even a global pandemic have transformed the notions of the role of the public library and served as a catalyst for continued change. COVID-19 affected every aspect of libraries. In addition to things such as social distancing measures and outdoor and online programming, many libraries found ways to respond to the pandemic and new ways to meet the needs of the community by serving as a community partner to provide access to much-needed information, hot meals, and mobile hotspots to those in need. Libraries provided COVID test kits through drive-up windows, and in some cases—such as during my time with Memphis Public Library—staff volunteered to sew masks for those in need when there was a shortage. Libraries joined statewide vaccination efforts, and many branches served as pop-up vaccination clinics.

Libraries are becoming community anchors with a focus on bringing together diverse groups of citizens who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact. They have become critically important agents in the civic and social health of the communities they serve. “Libraries are poised to reunite their communities, recommit to democratic practices, and reclaim their essential role as cornerstones of democracy,” notes Nancy Kranich, teaching professor in the Master of Information program at the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information.³

At the same time, libraries are increasingly coming under attack for the services they provide. In 2022, the American Library Association (ALA) noted a record 1,269 attempts at censorship—almost double the number recorded in 2021. Most of the challenged books were by or about people of color or LGBTQ+ people.⁴

“A year, a year and a half ago, we were told that these books didn’t belong in school libraries, and if people wanted to read



Memphis Public Libraries and Citizen University host CitizenFEST Memphis: A festive learning summit on how to exercise civic power. (Source: Citizen University)

them, they could go to a public library,” said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, the director of the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom. “Now, we’re seeing those same groups come to public libraries and come after the same books, essentially depriving everyone of the ability to make the choice to read them.”

The role of libraries as civic institutions is critical as we find ourselves living in one of the most divisive and polarizing times in US history. Driven by hyperpolarization and partisan media, Americans are demonizing and othering their neighbors and peers, and breaking down community bonds.

The Pew Research Center reports that Republicans and Democrats view not just the opposing party but also the individual

people in that party in a negative light. Growing numbers in each party now describe those in the other party as more closed-minded, dishonest, immoral, and unintelligent than other Americans.

The United States stands out among seventeen advanced economies as among the most conflicted when it comes to questions of social unity. A large majority of Americans say there are strong political and strong racial and ethnic conflicts in the United States and that most people disagree on basic facts.⁵

Compounding the levels of polarization and divisiveness, we are now grappling with a loneliness epidemic that has been deemed a public health crisis. According to a 2023 advisory from the US surgeon general, we are now seeing declines in the number of close friendships and memberships in organizations such as churches and social networks.⁶ These trends have dire consequences, with the advisory from the US surgeon general noting that “over four decades of research has produced robust evidence that lacking social connection—and in particular, scoring high on measures of social isolation—is associated with a significantly increased risk for early death from all causes,” and indicating that “loneliness and isolation are more widespread than many of the other major health issues of our day, including smoking (12.5 percent of US adults), diabetes (14.7 percent), and obesity (41.9 percent), and with comparable levels of risk to health and premature death.” The mortality impact of social disconnection rivals that of heavy smoking (up to fifteen cigarettes a day) and surpasses the risks associated with obesity and physical inactivity.⁷

Social connection, which involves how we relate, communicate, and bond with others, isn't just a feel-good factor—it's an engine that influences individual health, community safety, resilience, and even the overall prosperity of a place. Sadly, as is being

highlighted in reports and studies far and wide, many folks across America are missing out on strong social connections, and that's causing a ripple effect of issues. The detrimental effects of lost social connection extend beyond individuals, affecting performance, productivity, and engagement in schools, workplaces, and civic organizations.

What's striking is how many different population segments are being affected. Dr. Jeremy Nobel, founder of Project UnLonely, found that Medicare beneficiaries who suffer from loneliness cost the US roughly \$1,600 more each year than people who are more connected to others.⁸ Recent data from the Cigna Group highlights that employees who feel lonely are significantly more prone to job dissatisfaction, and fewer than half of lonely employees (47 percent) express the ability to work efficiently and perform at their peak (48 percent), in contrast to approximately two-thirds of non-lonely employees who can efficiently work (64 percent) and perform at their best (65 percent). And perhaps most interesting, that same data showed that young adults experience loneliness at a rate double that of seniors.⁹

When we lack these connections, it doesn't just impact how we feel; it touches everything from how our communities cope during disasters to the very fabric of our neighborhoods, our safety, our wealth, and even our representation in government. Social connection isn't just about making friends—it's the glue that holds communities together and creates a thriving environment for everyone, impacting everything from our health to our economic success and our ability to weather tough times.

Questions around these issues of polarization, loneliness, social connection, and civic renewal have been at the center of my professional career for over a decade, but they were heightened once I



Students from the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law host an outdoor festival on the grounds of Cossitt Library. (Source: Shamichael Hallman)

entered the library profession. I joined Memphis Public Libraries in the spring of 2017 as a senior library manager, tasked with overseeing the renovation of the historic Cossitt branch. Having the opportunity to reimagine and repurpose this library in a way that resonated with the surrounding neighborhood meant countless engagement and listening sessions to hear from the community. On any given week, I would show up at the surrounding parks, farmers markets, businesses, sporting events, and festivals to talk about the renovation efforts. Time and time again, my staff and I would hear from residents who expressed a desire to



Students from a Memphis-area summer leadership program stop by Cossitt Library to tour the building and offer input on the renovation efforts. (Source: Shamichael Hallman)

connect with others but lacked opportunities to do so; their need for outlets to celebrate the cultural vitality of the community; and their mounting anxiety around being among “the other”—those from different socioeconomic backgrounds or political ideologies.

As an institution, the public library offers a resource for people of any age to find what they need to help improve their quality of life. As a place, public libraries provide a space to meet other people and be exposed to opposing viewpoints, a venue to discover new cultures and cultivate imagination. In light of the current crises that have been highlighted, the greatest attribute of the public



Participants at CitizenFEST Memphis respond to a prompt: "In what ways do you feel you have power in civic life?" (Source: Citizen University)

library may be its ability to act as a center for and facilitator of civic engagement and civil discourse, where all voices may be heard and respect is displayed for diverse opinions, thoughts, histories, and cultural heritage. This expanded role in no way minimizes the amazing work that is done by libraries every single day—and the myriad needs that they meet. This call to action recognizes the power of the public library to help address the current moment in which we find ourselves as a nation.

In their book *Better Together*, political scientist Robert Putnam and sociologist Lewis Feldstein state: "Libraries are places where people come to know themselves and their communities. . . . People may go to the library looking mainly for information, but they find each other there."¹⁰ But what happens when they

“find each other” at this particular moment in our nation’s history? Have current levels of polarization created the conditions by which people have lost the capacity for tolerance, empathy, and respect of differences? Have we forgotten how to share space with others?

Ali Madanipour, professor of urban design in the School of Architecture, Planning, and Landscape at Newcastle University, says that “with globalization and international migration, smaller households and increasing variety of lifestyles, the urban populations are more diverse than ever before. As more people migrate to cities, they need essential spaces that facilitate social life, a common infrastructure of institutions and spaces that is a vital prerequisite for making collective life possible.”¹¹ Public spaces offer a way that we might move forward in establishing social connection and civic renewal in our communities. These spaces can be used to cultivate cross-racial, cross-cultural, cross-partisan, and interdisciplinary listening, learning, empathizing, bridge-building, deliberating, and problem-solving. These are the places that allow us to get out of our bubbles and respectfully engage one another. These are the places where we can negotiate tough problems and deepen our civic health through dialogue. These are the places that create a space for us to open our minds, understand our differences, and converse with neighbors and strangers alike. These are the places that allow us to understand our commonalities, celebrate shared values, and engage in creative problem-solving.

As noted in the American Planning Association’s *Planning for Equity Policy Guide*, “equitable public space sets the stage for interaction between different socioeconomic groups and can enhance tolerance and diversity cognition.” But this can only happen if such

spaces are designed, managed, and maintained properly. Public libraries are critical cornerstones of democracy. Due to their low barrier of entry, public libraries are among the few indoor spaces where everyone can be together.

A welcome must be extended to all—from the most affluent to the most vulnerable, and to people from across the spectrum of political ideologies. This requires internal staff training, intentional community outreach, and a continuous loop of finding authentic ways to engage with different cultural communities. High-quality physical design also plays an integral role in inviting engagement and interaction.

As affirmed by the Urban Libraries Council, an innovation and action think tank representing North America's largest public libraries, public libraries play an essential role in encouraging an active citizenry and leveraging its resources to promote human dignity, open dialogue, and respect for diverse viewpoints.

* * *

This book explores the critical role that public libraries play in fostering social connection, promoting civic renewal, and advancing the ideals of a healthy American democracy. I believe that libraries are one of our nation's greatest assets at this historical moment. But libraries need support to fill this expanded and often more challenging role. This is a call to action to advocate for libraries at this critical time in American democracy.

Each chapter delves into the evolving nature of these spaces, from their historical foundations to their crucial position as hubs for social connection, civic renewal, and community development. Highlighting the library's adaptability in addressing crises

such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the societal challenges of loneliness, division, and disengagement, I show how libraries serve both as social and civic infrastructure, the latter being a relatively new concept. Throughout the book you will see the many ways that public libraries have met and continue to meet the distinct needs of the communities they serve. You will hear stories from library professionals and leaders of civil society organizations about the ways that libraries have become a critical civic infrastructure by taking innovative approaches to provide services that their community needs, from social connection to civic engagement.

With libraries increasingly under attack, more people need to understand their full value and potential. The book closes with steps that you can take to support your library and find ideas to implement in your library if you are working as a community volunteer.

* * *

My onboarding process at the Memphis Public Library (MPL) included visiting all eighteen locations in the library system to see what they were doing and to speak with library staff doing this important work. In addition to my immersive experience with MPL, I've had the great good fortune to spend nearly a decade visiting public libraries across this country—large and small, urban and rural—and speaking with hundreds of librarians exploring the many ways they serve communities. In my current role as director of civic health and economic opportunity at Urban Libraries Council, I've seen firsthand the role of public libraries in preserving, protecting, and advancing the highest hopes and ideals

of democracy so that all members of our communities may fully participate in the democratic process.

Public libraries are expanding their mission to serve as an active and engaging community resource for social development and community building—a key attribute that should be better understood and celebrated.

I think that you will come away from this book thinking, *I didn't know libraries did that!*—and you will be armed with the information to advocate for libraries in a new way.

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CHAPTER 1

Lonely and Divided

“I want civility.”

“I want to treat others as my neighbor.”

“I want to help others.”

“I want to be seen.”

—Mesa County, Colorado, residents served
by the library system in 2019 survey

WHEN MICHELLE BOISVENUE-FOX became the director of the Mesa County Library system in 2019, she heard the sentiments above and other similar ones from community members served by the library system. Michelle is a library administrator with more than two decades of experience in driving innovation and creativity in library settings. She had quite a bit of experience in strategic planning but had never seen anything like this. “I was completely stunned,” Michelle said. “This is not something that I’ve seen

anywhere near this . . . maybe little dribbles here and there out of research in the past, but not like this, not like this.”

Through a network of eight locations, the public library system of this sprawling county serves its approximately 150,000 residents with a wide variety of resources and services. What Michelle and her team were seeing was a longing for connection and understanding in a world that has been increasingly divided, disconnected, and lonely. (See chapter 4 to learn more about how Michelle and her team responded.) As it turns out, Michelle wasn't the only leader hearing these yearnings from people to feel and be more connected.

In 2023, the office of the US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy issued an advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community. “When I first took office as surgeon general in 2014, I didn't view loneliness as a public health concern. But that was before I embarked on a cross-country listening tour, where I heard stories from my fellow Americans that surprised me. People began to tell me they felt isolated, invisible, and insignificant. Even when they couldn't put their finger on the word *lonely*, time and time again people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, from every corner of the country, would tell me, ‘I have to shoulder all of life's burdens by myself,’ or ‘If I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice.’ It was a lightbulb moment for me: social disconnection was far more common than I had realized.” And there's data to back up these sentiments. A 2023 Gallup Poll showed that 17 percent of US adults report experiencing significant loneliness “yesterday,” projecting to an estimated 44 million people.¹

Think of a time in your life when you felt most connected. Chances are there were at least three things at play. First, there were

probably a variety of relationships in your life. This could have been a combination of a spouse/partner, family, and friends. And in addition to having a variety of relationships, you probably had some frequency in your interactions with them, such as a weekly call with a parent or a monthly gathering with close friends. This, both the variety and frequency of interactions, is referred to as the *structure* of your social connections. Next, it's likely that these relationships served a number of functions in your life. Perhaps the monthly check-in with your friend provided you with a level of emotional support that no other relationship provided. Perhaps your membership at a local club or religious institution provided you access to much needed support during a time of crisis. This diversity of support refers to the *function* of your social connections. Every relationship has its shares of ups and downs, regardless of the structure and function. But as you reflect on the times in your life when you felt most connected, it's quite likely that the nature of your relationships made you feel more included than excluded and produced more satisfaction than strain. This refers to the *quality* of your social connections. All three of these, working together, produce the dynamics in which people experience robust social connection.²

Having greater social connection has been shown to positively influence a range of mental, physical, and other health-related outcomes. Recent studies highlight how those who are more socially connected have a longer lifespan; are at reduced risk for acute illnesses and chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and stroke, including susceptibility to viruses and upper respiratory infections; and are more likely to mount an effective immune response to a vaccine. Individuals who are socially connected are more likely to engage in healthier behaviors, such as



Mesa County Libraries in Colorado host Culture Fest, which highlights the many cultures represented in the county through performances, country tables, and cultural beauty from around the world. (Source: Mesa County Libraries)

starting and sticking to an exercise routine; show better adherence to medical advice; and are more likely to have better sleep quality and quantity. Scientific evidence has tied the relationship of high-quality close relationships and feeling socially connected to decreased risk for all-cause mortality as well as a range of disease morbidities.³

Social connection includes a person's involvement in activities in the community or society that provides interaction with others,

their sense of belonging to a group with whom they share common interests, and the resources to which we have access through our social connections.

Recent research shows that having strong social connections can influence health through psychological processes such as the sense of meaning and purpose. Adults across the globe rate their social relationships, particularly with family and close friends, as the most important source of meaning, purpose, and motivation in their lives.⁴ A sense of meaning positively contributes to health because it motivates greater self-regulation in pursuing goals—including health goals. Conversely, being isolated or in poor-quality relationships can increase the likelihood that one perceives potential challenges as stressful. This stress may be heightened because the individual has less support and fewer resources to draw upon to cope with the situation.

Anyone of any age or background can experience loneliness and isolation, but not all individuals or groups experience the factors that facilitate or become barriers to social connection equally, and some groups are at higher risk than others. Some people or groups are exposed to greater barriers. It's critical to examine and highlight the disproportionate risk they face and to target interventions to address their needs, some of which include access to inclusive spaces, such as public libraries, that promote belonging and facilitate social connections.

On Social Disconnection

Social disconnection is defined as the objective or subjective deficits in social connection, including deficits in relationships and roles, their functions, and/or their quality. Social disconnection is comprised of social isolation (having few social relationships,

group memberships, and infrequent social interaction), loneliness, and social negativity. Formal definitions of loneliness vary, but typically they share two common elements: an emotional component (i.e., the feeling is unwelcomed or distressing) and a social cognition component (i.e., the perception of being disconnected from other people along with a desire to be more connected). Social negativity is defined as the presence of harmful interactions or relationships rather than the absence of desired social interaction and relationships.

Robust social connection needs to have structure, function, and quality. (Think about the connections in the earlier thought exercise about a time when you felt most connected.) Without each of them, we can begin to experience feelings of disconnection and some of the negative qualities associated with them.

Social connection can be affected by factors such as mental health, socioeconomic status, and life stage. For example, physical separation from others due to circumstances such as geographical distance can contribute to feelings of loneliness. Other instances might revolve around individuals who may struggle with social skills, making it challenging for them to initiate and maintain meaningful connections. Societal factors can include norms and values, technology, and historic inequities. Community factors such as availability of outdoor space and access to transportation also must be considered. Modern lifestyles and changes in societal structures can contribute to loneliness. Factors such as limited mobility, fewer close-knit communities, and the breakdown of traditional social networks can leave individuals feeling disconnected. When all of these are viewed collectively, we begin to see the many ways that social disconnection can occur—and the negative impacts that can emerge as a result.

A 2023 report showed that over a seventeen-year period beginning in 2003, time spent alone increased while time spent on in-person social engagement decreased. There were sharp declines in social engagement with friends and non-household family social engagement.⁵

Although risk may differ across indicators of social disconnection, studies find the highest prevalence for loneliness and isolation among people with poor physical or mental health, disabilities, and financial insecurity, as well as single parents, those who live alone, and younger and older populations. Additional at-risk groups include individuals from minority groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, and rural residents.⁶

While some social isolation, loneliness, and social negativity are part of a normal human experience, the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection (GILC) notes that “severe levels of loneliness are estimated to affect upwards of 50 percent of adults, and social negativity is estimated to co-occur in roughly half of relationships.”⁷ The GILC is a collective of national organizations committed to end the pressing global issues of loneliness and social isolation. They have found that social capital—the resources to which individuals and groups have access through their social connections—is decreasing, and fewer people are engaging in social and religious groups. In response, the GILC has issued a set of recommendations that include the creation of awareness campaigns that provide clear and concise information about social connection and all forms of social disconnection—social isolation, loneliness, and social negativity.⁸ Additionally, the GILC has called for increased research funding in an effort to identify and improve interventions that prevent or reduce social isolation and loneliness and increase social connection.

A Growing Political Divide

Recent polling data has highlighted that, across both political parties, the share of people with a highly negative view of the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994. Most of these intense partisans believe that the opposing party's policies "are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being."⁹

A 2017 comprehensive review of empirical scholarship in sociology, education, demography, and economics found that "growing levels of income inequality have been accompanied by increasing socioeconomic segregation across friendship networks and romantic partners, residential neighborhoods, K–12 and university education, and workplaces and the labor market."¹⁰

The thoughts from Michelle in Mesa County, Colorado, the surgeon general, and the GILC mirror much of what I've heard from leaders across this country—library professionals, faith leaders, urban planners, nonprofit founders, scholars, mayors of cities large and small, and residents, all voicing similar observations that something isn't quite right. These leaders are looking for bold new solutions for how we might solve the crisis of loneliness.

Sparking a Culture of Civic Renewal

In the spring of 2020, when I was with the Memphis Public Library, a diverse group of sixty-four Americans were invited to contribute our thoughts on what could activate a dynamic culture of civic renewal in America by 2030 as part of the Strengthen Our American Republic (SOAR) initiative. The group included Sikhs and Christians, journalists and scholars, professionals from nonprofits and community foundations. We were encouraged to imagine a future in which Americans from different walks of life and with political perspectives could constructively engage with

one another in an effort to create a national commitment to truth, trust, reason, and civility, and work toward shared community and national ideals, principles, and values.

We were given the task of answering various questions and reflecting on a personal experience that has profoundly impacted how we see the current state of civic health in America. The answers from the personal experiences that we shared were organized into five overarching themes.

First, we discussed the ability to transcend political divisions. Despite the escalating polarization in national politics, many of us found that engaging with those on the other side of the political spectrum on a personal level often led to transcending differences. Examples were shared of communities coming together for charitable causes, illustrating how strong personal connections can outweigh political divides, especially at the local level.

Second, we delved into the disillusionment with government and institutions. In an era marked by declining trust in government and media, some of the interviewees recounted personal experiences that highlighted how institutions have contributed to disillusionment. They highlighted disparities between different socioeconomic groups in political processes and expressed disappointment not only in government but also in the media. Although technology has made vast amounts of information accessible, its influence through cable news and social media was criticized for fostering division rather than empowerment.

We also touched upon the experiences of otherness, marginalization, and stereotyping. Many of the interviewees shared instances of feeling marginalized or discriminated against due to our appearances or beliefs. Universally, we emphasized the importance of face-to-face interactions in breaking down

stereotypes and fostering understanding among people of different backgrounds.

Additionally, we discussed the deterioration of discourse in society. There was a consensus among us all that civility has declined, regardless of political affiliation. Instances of encountering harsh rhetoric were highlighted, with some in the group even describing how political discussions within our families had become so divisive and heated that they could no longer be held.

Last, we explored the impact of civic engagement. Many of the interviewees had personal experiences within the realm of democratic engagement that profoundly impacted their lives. For some, this awakening began in childhood or adolescence as they witnessed a parent or mentor who had been in the trenches of political activism. Others were profoundly impacted by a shocking event or public crisis: 9/11, the outcome of an election, the aftermath of a hurricane. Still other interviewees were inspired by hearing powerful firsthand accounts of how citizen activism led to change.

While each theme resonated deeply, the topic of civic engagement stood out as particularly compelling to me, as it was the story that I shared about a 2019 conversation with a woman named Grace. As a college student, Grace, along with a few friends and classmates, made a life-altering visit to a Memphis library on a fateful day in March 1960. Accounts from librarians and patrons who were there at the time observed that the students were not loud or boisterous. In fact, these students were quite the opposite, and they were even called courteous by one patron. Shortly after the students entered the branch, White librarians advised them of the rules regarding segregation and asked them to leave. When the students remained in the library, the police were called and within a matter of minutes all of the students

had been arrested. They were charged with disorderly conduct, loitering, and breach of peace. Those charges were serious enough that these students spent many hours in jail until they were able to post bond. When asked why they called the police, the librarians admitted that the reason they had the students arrested was not because they were rowdy or rude; rather it was because they were Negroes.

Almost sixty years later, I able to sit down with Grace and also with many other individuals who were a part of that story. I was able to hear their stories, see the various artifacts, and tell them directly that there would be no way that I, as a Black man, could now be managing that very same library if it had not been for the sacrifice they made. It sealed in me a desire to ensure that this library became a place where their history was remembered, where people of all walks of life were welcomed, and where conversations such as those could continue.

The summary of the interviews of the group of sixty-four (we were not given access to individual interviews) showed that the depth of division and marginalization in our country had profoundly impacted many people in the group.

A number of the interviewees noted that the 2016 election was an inflection point, leading to an increasing number of Americans who were caught in echo chambers and assumptions about what the other side thinks. One interviewee described returning to his hometown during the lead-up to the election and finding himself in heated conversations with childhood friends. This brought him face-to-face with “the profound new divide.”

A consistent theme that ran through the concerns and interviewees centered on othering and belonging. Coined by john a. powell (name intentionally lowercase) at the University of California, Berkeley, the term *othering* describes a pattern of

activities and structures that lead to people being isolated from and not fully accepted by the dominant society or culture, and therefore frequently disadvantaged across the full range of human differences based on group identities. The opposite of othering is *belonging*—the values and practices where no person is left out of our circle of concern. With belonging comes the power to co-create the structures that shape a community. Bridging is required to overcome othering. *Bridging* involves two or more people/groups coming together across lines of difference (such as race and/or power dynamics) in a way that both affirms their distinct identities and creates a new inclusive “we” identity.

The concepts of othering, belonging, and bridging have been key to my work and foundational to the work of many others. If we are to effectively tackle both the issues of social disconnection and political polarization, bridging efforts will offer a critical path forward.

In the months that followed the completion of the SOAR report, I reached out to many of the people in the group to learn more about their thoughts and community-level work on the themes of otherness, marginalization, and stereotyping, as well as stories of toxic and poisoned discourse between Americans.

Many of those whom I spoke with felt that an “us vs. them” mindset has gripped the country. And that this mindset was affecting Americans’ trust in institutions and each other (at the level of family, neighborhood, etc.). Other themes that emerged touched on disinformation, trust levels, and civil unrest. As these individuals shared their personal stories, I reflected on things I had been experiencing. Being involved in conversations at the local level about disparities in how the Black middle and high school students in my community were being disciplined helped me to recognize the difficulty I was experiencing in engaging in some of

these conversations, not only with those with whom I share some identity (faith, neighborhood, etc.), but also with many folks outside of my “traditional circles.”

These interviewees imagined a renewed civic culture in the United States replacing echo chambers and partial truths with “creative new narratives that illuminate the rich and painful experiences of our historic and current community and national realities.” They believed that these new narratives should be inclusive of the full range of life experiences and become broadly accessible through creative artistic expression. A core goal would be a focus on teaching people how to listen and talk with each other through the cultivation of cultural humility, civility, and sympathetic listening. Particular attention would need to be focused on truth-telling and healing around racial issues. They imagined a culture that elevated diverse voices in each community and elevated those who had been historically and systemically marginalized.

According to these visionary leaders, a culture of civic renewal would require passionate and skilled individuals who could facilitate conversations among diverse members of the community and train others to be proficient to do the same. These skilled facilitators, representing a diversity of age, income, faith, and more, would possess the unique ability to help people overcome differences and would have the skills needed to gather diverse folks, engaging them to listen to one another, empathize with differing views, and problem-solve. Furthermore, it was affirmed that there would need to be a place(s) in each community for these gatherings to happen. Dedicated spaces such as libraries, cafes, and churches would provide the venue for people to experience new perspectives, negotiate tough problems, and deepen civic health (see chapter 3 for more detail).

Beyond the personal question, a number of other questions were asked during the interview, such as “What is your vision to achieve civic renewal throughout America by 2030? How would you achieve this? What specific community, cultural, and institutional actions would have been realized in order to achieve your vision?” The answers that I gave then are the same answers that I give today.

Taking inspiration from great leaders, librarians, and learning networks, my vision to achieve civic renewal throughout America by 2030 is one that recognizes that America is trapped



Swing Vote Memphis was a pop-up art installation designed to highlight resources on voter registration and polling locations. (Source: Shamichael Hallman)