Source: nurturedevelopment.org

*The Black Swan (Cygnus atratus) is a large waterbird, a species of swan, which breeds mainly in the southeast and southwest regions of Australia. The species was hunted to extinction in New Zealand, but later reintroduced.*

**Black Swans**

‘The Black Swan’ theory developed by [Nassim Nicholas Taleb](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nassim_Nicholas_Taleb) is a metaphor for events that seem to emerge out of the blue but have a major historical impact. They are often retrospectively explained away by false logic/rationalisations. Hence their significance tends to be missed. These events, though disproportionately significant relative to more predictable occurrences, do not play to standard scientific norms, or rules of probability. Such occurrences are therefore ‘outliers’.

In this post I want to explore what I am terming a Black Swan of Social Change, namely the Heat Wave of 2003; I will also play with the metaphor further by commenting on where I think the White Swans and Ugly Ducklings are.

**Heat Wave: 70,000 people across Europe die in three weeks**

Nowhere is the need for resilient communities more apparent than in the face of natural disasters. Heat waves, more so than hurricanes, floods and freezing conditions punctuate this fact, underlining the need for community building at neighbourhood scale to ensure sufficient resilience to withstand such climatic challenges. Heat waves, as with other natural disasters, also highlight the limits of health and social care systems to intervene unilaterally.

In 2005 Hurricane Katrina exacted a death toll of 1,836 as it wrecked havoc and devastation across New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. The world watched on in horror as real time images were piped into our living rooms, showing city and federal systems rendered helpless in the face of this tragedy. Two years prior, in August 2003, a heat wave struck Europe, killing an estimated 70,000 people, most of whom were over 65 years old. The media and the public for the most part were oblivious until after the fact. In meteorological terms, this counts as a Black Swan occurrence.

A high-pressure system produced the hottest summer weather since record keeping began in 1873 and, when measured by mortality, the worst natural disaster in contemporary France.

paris-skylineAccording to official estimates, 14,802 people died in France during the first half of August 2003 as a direct consequence of this heat wave. There were many factors at play in France, and in particular in Paris, that did not play out in other European cities to the same extent. In London, for example, 600 people died, but nearly 6,000 died in Paris. August is a time when most professionals go on holiday in France. As a consequence the first to realize the scale of what was happening were French undertakers, who were being overwhelmed with bodies.

The number of doctors and other healthcare professionals on vacation was an important factor in that it reduced response time and capacity, but there were also a variety of other factors at play, such as the density of population and quality of housing in any given area. During the first two weeks of August in Paris, 2003, the people most likely to die were women over 65, living alone and in substandard urban housing.

Others contributory factors included the collective impact of air conditioning on the cumulative heat and cooling down time of a city, particularly at night (most Older People, infants, and vulnerable people die at night during heat waves). The heat island around the respective houses and apartment blocks were measured retrospectively; they proved that while “cities often function as the beating heart of the economy, they could also become the pressure cookers of a country”, as was the case in Paris for those two weeks. The extent of vegetation in the environs was also a critical issue and, along with lower housing density, explains why only 600 people died in London, a little over 10% of the death toll in Paris, where green space abounds relative to Paris.

It is also important to remember that often people don’t notice the effects of dehydration and so tend not to drink enough water, and that some medications can amplify the effects of extreme heat. Reduced mobility was another critical factor. Yet according to [Keller](http://medhist.wisc.edu/faculty/keller/index.shtml) the single biggest contributory factor for dying in a heat wave is: living alone. It may be more helpful to interpret that critical factor in terms of the extent to which one is connected to the wider community of place. In that frame, as against viewing the practice of living alone as the substantive issue, we see that it is the paucity of relationships with neighbours that kills within the context of a certain confluence of events. Put boldly, for the most vulnerable in a prolonged and intense heat wave, community connections, not access to services, are a matter of life and death.

Keller rightly points out that the heat wave of 2003 was as much a social as a health and epidemiological disaster. The interplay between quality of housing, economic insecurity, isolation and health equity are well rehearsed, but when set against global demographic shifts and climate change the immensity of the challenges facing public health and our neighbourhoods become clear.

**Analysis**

*While seismic shifts are difficult if not impossible to spot ahead of time, in demographic terms we are experiencing more than our fair share. In 1950 the world’s population stood at 2.4 billion, in 1985 it had reached 5 billion and by 2020 it is projected to reach 8 billion.*

In a decade or so the world will be older and will be far more concentrated in urban areas; indeed in the next five years, for the first time in human history, a majority of the world’s population will live in cities. The speed at which the world grows older is mind-boggling: in the year 2000, 420 million people were 65 or older (6.9% of the world’s population). By 2050 this cohort is projected to increase to approximately 1.5 billion, or 16.3 % of the total population of the world. The world is getting older at a rate unprecedented in human history. ([http://data.worldbank.org](http://data.worldbank.org/))

Outside the Global South, aging combined with large drops in fertility means fewer workers to support growing numbers of retirees, pushing inflation up, and tax take for public services down. Increased longevity sits side by side with other demographic ‘firsts’ that are quickly exposing the financial limits of our medical systems and social services, and raising serious questions about their capacity to unilaterally improve health, social care and promote general well being.

The 2003 heat wave provides a tragic reminder of the need to concern ourselves not only with institutional and systems reform, but also with an effort toward building communities of place. This is with a view to supporting local people to identify, connect and mobilise their own and their neighbours’ assets in pursuit of a good life and enduring change.

**Ugly Ducklings**

Whether looking for Black Swans or White, it is difficult to see if the filter through which they are viewed shows them to be no more than ugly ducklings.

The prevailing filter through which we view most social challenges is deficit based. We don’t see the Swan, we see the Ugly Duckling; this is particularly true in low-income neighbourhoods. Hence we tend to see tragedies such as the Paris heat wave as a failure on the part of community, and further evidence for the need for more services.

Mapping people’s journey towards wellbeing in this way is deeply problematic, especially if we harbour aspirations towards deeper democracy. It obscures from view the capacities that exist within and around people that can be used to secure what is required for a good life in any and all climates. While the map is not the territory, if communities of place are mapped as Ugly Ducklings, those that reside there internalise that map and so the actual terrain becomes distorted. Consequently their responsiveness becomes dulled, sometimes with tragic consequences as was the case in Paris, August 2003.

What once was a label simply mapped onto reality becomes ‘the way of things around here’; a half-baked perspective becomes a fact of life and the dominant culture. And so just as an immature white swan can come to be known and treated as an ugly duckling in the well-known fairy tale, communities and their residents can become known by the sum of their problems and not their capacities and potential.

The work of [John McKnight](http://www.abcdinstitute.org/faculty/McKnight/) and [Jody Kretzmann](http://www.abcdinstitute.org/profile/?ProfileID=207) has contributed most to revealing the disabling effects of mapping people by their so-called deficits or needs.

In the late 1980s, Professor John McKnight and Professor Jody Kretzmann travelled across North America, visiting over 300 neighbourhoods in 20 cities. In partnership with a core group of associates, they set out to understand the building blocks of healthy urban neighbourhoods. Their four-year odyssey brought them into personal contact with thousands of people commonly labelled and defined by the sum of their issues, such as unemployment, teen pregnancies, poor housing and other problems.

John and Jody had the presence of mind to ask a different set of questions than would be the norm. They sought to understand what happened when, despite socio-economical-political challenges, citizenship and community prevail in neighbourhoods, not why there were so many apparent problems. This research was essentially an ethnographical revelation of how low income communities become stronger and endure. Through this participatory process they gathered over 3,000 stories in response to questions like: “Can you share a time when you and your neighbours came together to make things better around here?”

These stories revealed six key ‘community building blocks’:

1. The skills of local residents
2. The power of local associations
3. The resources of public, private and non-profit institutions
4. The physical resources and ecology of local places
5. The economic resources of local places, and reciprocal exchange in more general terms
6. The stories and heritage of local places

These building blocks, which John and Jody eventually categorised as ‘assets’, represent local residents’ down-to-earth account of their engagement in producing and nurturing their health and wellbeing, environment and local economy, raising powerful children, ageing comfortably and actively at home, responding to natural or human-made disasters and deepening democracy, justice and wisdom.

These assets also served to challenge the prevailing approach to urban and rural development challenges; for these helping professions, funding agencies and policy makers focused almost exclusively on the needs and deficiencies of individuals, families, neighbourhoods, towns and villages.

The seminal work [*Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets (1993)*](http://www.abcdinstitute.org/publications/basicmanual/) captured the lessons of that four-year engagement. It also described the principles and practices of asset-based approaches developed over earlier decades by John and Jody. Encouraged by record sales of the book, they established the [Asset-Based Community Development Institute](http://www.abcdinstitute.org/) in 1995. That same year, John McKnight published [*The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits*](http://www.abcdinstitute.org/publications/careless/), a series of essays written during his four decades of work in the urban neighbourhoods of Canada and the United States. The book paints a scathing picture of “how competent communities have been invaded, captured, and colonized by professionalized services” with devastating results.

In 2010 John McKnight and [Peter Block](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Block) collaborated on a book entitled [*Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*](http://www.abundantcommunity.com/home/book.html). They argue that as well as needing a village to raise a child, that village is also the key to a satisfying life more generally. The book reminds us that we need our neighbours and community to be healthy, to produce jobs, to protect the land, and to care for young, old and those on the margins.

As we approach the Institute’s 20th anniversary in 2015, the archives are replete with practical tools and probing analyses of modern society. Taken in the round they offer both a proscription and prescription of modern society. The proscription: don’t seek your good life in the market place. The prescription: in each of our neighbourhoods reside those whose gifts and talents combine with ours to provide all that we need to live well and prosper – if they can discover, connect and mobilise them.

Today the ABCD Institute and the principles and processes it espouses occupy a central position as part of a large and growing movement which considers local assets as the primary building blocks of sustainable community development. Central to the asset-based approach is the emphasis on community building which is citizen-led and relation focused. To achieve this it is necessary to work in a place based way and at neighbourhood scale, with a focus on people’s capacities, since people can’t know what they need until they first know what they have.

**White Swans**

The allegory of the Ugly Duckling works because cygnets bear a mild resemblance to ducklings and their dishevelled grey plumage contrasts unfavourably with that of the classic white plumage of the adult swan; it is maturity that ultimately wins the day and reveals the white swan. A central part of the challenge in revealing the White Swan behind the Ugly Duckling label of modern day neighbourhoods is that, while most of us call our neighbourhoods communities, in practice they are not, they simply have not reached their potential; they have not matured, yet.

Communities are made up of groups of related people; powerful and enduring communities create cultures where citizenship prevails and hence a culture of community flourishes. The places where we live are all too often made up of unrelated people, neighbourhoods of strangers; at most we know the neighbours who live either side of us and the people across the street, who we nod at each morning before getting in our cars to drive to work. For those who have sufficient mobility and social capital outside their respective neighbourhood this is tolerable. However for those with diminished mobility and social capital, neighbourhoods can become prisons of loneliness, only a heat wave away from tragedy. Our neighbourhoods are therefore places in need of recovery, and maturation. That said there is much to work with.

Our neighbourhoods are in need of recovery not because they are ugly ducklings, but because we have failed a) to recognise them as swans, and b) to nurture the conditions for each metaphorical white swan to emerge in all its respective glory. The assets that reside there can be identified, connected and mobilised into productive and inclusive action through community building processes, the kind which we have been removing from the investment sheet of local governments for over thirty years.

The white swan represents maturing communities of place where the culture of reciprocity is palpable. Now where might we go to find one of those I hear you ask? From a policy point of view I believe this should be ‘the’ question of our time, and the hottest topic of all. The answer to this question is that communities are all around us, close at hand, awaiting the community building that will make the invisible assets within them visible in all their abundance.

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NEXT POST

[The Economics of Happiness](https://www.restorecommons.com/the-economics-of-happiness/)

**Thought Leader**



[**Cormac Russell**](https://www.restorecommons.com/author/cormac-russell/)

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