



The power of strangers

People are getting back to groups—from niche hobby clubs to mass political protests—changing lives and communities in the process. BY SERENA RENNER

RESIDENTS OF THE ECOVILLAGE AT ITHACA (EVI) RAISE A SPOON-TOAST BEFORE BEGINNING DINNER, WHICH INCLUDES ORGANIC VEGETABLES FROM THEIR COMMUNITY GARDEN.

IT'S A SUNNY SATURDAY IN Long Beach, California, and Ty Teissere is hosting a workshop to design and build a clay pizza oven in his backyard. Until now, most of the attendees have been strangers, but you'd never know it watching each of them lend a hand, talking and laughing. Ofelia brings a delicious casserole for lunch; Roberta supplies fresh honey from her own beehives; and Ryan brings his steadfast determination to see the project through. Teissere offers the materials and building skills to lead the group. Just another day in the life of the Long

Beach Permaculture Meetup, a loose association of local residents with a passion for environmental design. In only four meetings, the oven was complete, and Teissere has been throwing pizza parties in his backyard ever since. Group members and like-minded neighbors regularly gather there now, armed with handmade pizza dough, fresh toppings and occasionally, an environmental documentary to project onto the fence. "I wouldn't have come close to having the energy to build the oven on my own if there wasn't a group to help," Teissere says. "I could do it

PHOTOGRAPH: ROBERT NICKELBERG/GETTY IMAGES

physically, but I just wouldn't have been as inspired. The new energy that comes from others makes the work less mundane." Since the publication of *Bowling Alone* by Harvard University public policy professor Robert Putnam in 2000, the received wisdom has been that we are experiencing a decline in civic engagement, social connections and the trust and reciprocity that go along with them. Societal shifts—delayed marriages, higher divorce rates—the shrinkage of extended families—and the rise of social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook are all thought to have

further accelerated this disconnectedness. But people around the world are finding rejuvenation in groups, from book clubs that meet in living rooms to the mass street protests that have swept the Arab world. This coming together may well be a response to the breakdown of social networks caused by everything from the changing nature of the family to the ongoing economic squeeze. And in some cases, these face-to-face meetings are facilitated by the same digital technologies thought to be supplanting them. What they have in common, though, according

to Henry Hemming, author of the book *Together: How Small Groups Achieve Big Things*, is the power of giving—a collective effort that harnesses the gifts of individuals to achieve something greater than the sum of its parts. "The frequency of meetings, the shared wisdom of others and the insights achieved through group discussion allow your interest to flourish," Hemming writes. "Not only has it been moved to a hothouse, but your enthusiasm has been re-potted, placed in a large container of premium compost and is now being watered daily." But groups not only hurl members toward their goals but make happier, healthier people who are better connected to themselves and their communities, according to the evidence. And the best news of all? Groups seem to be on the rise. While statistics on informal gatherings are hard to come by, the numbers support this idea. A study by the Pew Research Center found that 74 percent of Americans belong to some kind of group, compared with 65 percent who said the same in 2008. The report, "The Social Side of the Internet," covers 2,303 adults and 27 kinds of associations, from religious organizations to fan clubs. Pew found that the average American is involved in 3.5 groups. The most popular are church gatherings, sports leagues and consumer groups. Volunteering is up, too, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service. The number of Americans volunteering jumped by 1.6 million from 2008 to 2009, the largest increase in six years. While figures are fuzzier for Europe, a 2008 report published in the journal *Social Information Studies* noted that the percentage of the population that participated in or volunteered for an organization grew in a majority of European countries between 2004 and 2006. Germany and Italy showed the largest hikes, 17 and 11 percent respectively. So while we may no longer meet in bingo halls or Kiwanis Clubs, there are countless examples of people getting together across the globe. After hearing reports of increasing "loneliness" in the U.K.—defined by rising numbers of unmarried adults, people living alone and families relocating—Hemming decided to investigate the social landscape. While he did discover displacement, he also found to his surprise that there had been a

surge in group affiliations during the last decade. He tracked associations with interests ranging from books and paganism to battle re-enactments and beekeeping, and he analyzed what made the groups work. Groups that last longer consist of members who make an equal contribution, creating fellowship, camaraderie and value.

“You’re less likely in Britain today to get to know your neighbors than you would have been 50 years ago,” Hemming says. “This is not because we’re becoming a nation of curmudgeons; we just don’t get the same opportunities. If you look historically at other occasions when a social network becomes eroded, generally we look to find another. And I think over the last 10 years, there’s been a shift toward trying to find these networks in small voluntary groups.”

HIS BOOK CITES A WEALTH OF evidence pointing to the same message: If you look beyond the traditional forms of social organization, there is a clear pattern: Associations are growing in number. This surge may be partially fueled by the Internet, and Teissere’s clay oven conclave is a case in point. This group got together via meetup.com, a site that helps users join and create regional groups around their interests. Unlike many online communities, meetup.com aims to fill some of the void left by disappearing Elks Clubs and bowling leagues; it encourages people to “use the Internet to get off the Internet.” Since the site launched in 2002, 90,000 groups have formed in 118 countries, uniting outdoor enthusiasts, singles, dog lovers and crafters alike.

Kathryn Fink, community “evangelist” for meetup.com, says most of the website’s users are people going through major life transitions, from moving to a new city to starting a family. “These are things that disrupt your support network, and suddenly you find yourself in need of connecting with people again,” Fink says. “It’s great to do that through something you’re passionate about instead of just trying to go to a bar or the grocery store, where you’re not really talking with people.”

“We believe in the power of strangers,” Fink says. “Whether you have an interest that your friends can’t share, or you discover a new one, there’s something affirming about meeting with strangers, feeling a connection you can’t find anywhere else.”



MEMBERS OF THE GERMAN ECOVILLAGE GROUP CLUB 99 START THE DAY WITH A COMMUNAL RITUAL. MEETUP GROUPS LIKE THIS ARE GAINING POPULARITY IN EUROPE AND THE U.S.

Meetup.com is gaining popularity quickly among Europeans. The number of E.U. groups practically doubled this year from 2,739 to 5,416. One Dutch meetup that attracted more than 4,000 members was MobileMonday (MoMo) Amsterdam, an offshoot of a global network that plans events for people interested in mobile phone innovation. What started as an effort to connect and inspire cell phone entrepreneurs transformed into an influential bimonthly TED-like forum, more about mobile technology’s impact on society than how to get your hands on the latest app.

In an era of pricey consulting seminars, MoMo Amsterdam was a breath of fresh air. It was free; everything was shared online; events were accompanied by dinners and pub crawls; and it attracted top-notch speakers, from foursquare co-founder Dennis Crowley to DNA researcher Andrew

Hessel. With the help of the online marketing magazine *Market Facts*—which posted the group’s first event and video recaps—as well as a buzzing cacophony of early Twitter adopters, seats for events became a hot commodity, and some 200 tickets sold out within minutes every time.

“The community was already out there,” says Marc Fonteijn, one of the group’s original organizers. “They had Twitter, their own blogs, their online places. But what they didn’t have was the space to get together, see each other and drink a beer.” Witnessing strangers meet and gain exposure to far-out topics—from how a Croatian doctor developed a savvy iPhone sleeve to help people perform CPR to a woman’s experience driving a tractor to the South Pole—was close to magic, Fonteijn says.

In addition to the hobby groups and grassroots movements that meetup.com’s

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founders expected the site to generate, they were surprised to see ad hoc parent-teacher associations, chambers of commerce and health support groups sprout. In Queens, New York, Cheryl Ocampo started a meetup for mothers with autistic children after she grew dissatisfied with the resources on the Internet, in doctor’s offices and at her daughter Zariah’s school. “I would go to the workshops, support meetings and trainings, but at the end of the day I still felt disconnected,” Ocampo recalls. “I was looking for a community that I could relate to, because living the lifestyle of autism changes everything.”

So in November of 2006, Ocampo—who had never considered herself the leader of anything—started the Queens County Parents Autism Coalition, which soon attracted both parents and special education professionals. In no time, these parents were taking their children to the park and the movies—excursions most had considered unthinkable before giving it a shot with the group. The meetup became the non-profit Queens County Parents Autism Coalition in 2008 and provides assistance to parents in Queens and around the world. Now if Ocampo’s up at 1 a.m. because her daughter is having an episode, she has someone to call: Youla, another group member and the director of the nonprofit.

live in some form of self-identified intentional community in the U.S.

“These communities can be big, little, urban, rural, suburban... and the common values can be all over the map,” says Laird Schaub, FIC’s executive secretary. “They can be economic, social, political, environmental, spiritual or any combination of those things. The importance is just finding people dedicated to creating a life based on common ground and cooperative culture.”

Such communities value relationships over material possessions, Schaub adds; many of their members share food and a few even share income with the goal of bringing people together and creating interwoven lives. Intentional communities have served as models for high-satisfaction, low-resource living around the world. One group in Boston, Massachusetts, turned a rundown parking lot that is two blocks away from the subway into a thriving community that aims to showcase how people

manage to live happy lives without cars.

The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) Europe is connected to 84 communities dedicated to lowering their ecological footprints and more than 5,000 affiliated projects worldwide. Leaders of one initiative in Senegal hope to transition 14,000 traditional settlements to ecovillages. These settlements not only strive for economic and ecological sustainability but focus on a community’s social and cultural needs.

While qualities like trust and sharing come naturally to many indigenous villages, cooperative living has to be relearned in much of the northern hemisphere, says Kosha Joubert, secretary general of GEN Europe. “The importance of the ecovillage movement in the North is that it shows how we can reduce our ecological footprints, our CO₂ emissions, but also be happy rebuilding the fabric of a healthy society,” Joubert says.

Joubert spent 11 years living in the German ecovillage of Sieben Linden, a community of 120 people, including 30 children, that has cut its emissions to 30 percent of the national average using solar energy, a closed water system and composting toilets as well as an organic garden that satisfies 80 percent of the community’s needs. The village also established a unique social structure based on five leadership groups that manage everything from purchasing food to organizing

PHOTOGRAPH: AMIN AKHTAR/LAIF

INITIATIVES LIKE THE QUEENS COUNTY Parents Autism Coalition demonstrate how groups can impact more than an individual’s social life. In some cases, groups even become people’s home lives. The Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC) documents a steady rise in people owning or renting property together, with more than 1,000 communities in the U.S. listed in its directory in 2010, compared with 350 in 1990. And while many of these communities exist under the radar, the Fellowship estimates that 100,000 people



MARC FONTEIJN (CENTER) HELPED START MOBILEMONDAYS IN THE NETHERLANDS, TO BRING TOGETHER PEOPLE INTERESTED IN MOBILE PHONE INNOVATION.

seminars, and there are many other outlets for personal development. “Communities are a very strong laboratory for personal transformation and growth,” Joubert says. “You receive a lot of feedback but also a lot of possibilities to try yourself out in positions of responsibility.”

Joubert has witnessed a growing interest in these models from individuals, academics, corporations and government officials. The German Foreign Ministry recently funded a project involving work with North African communities on climate change solutions and community stabilization, while the E.U. is bankrolling a project that looks at ecovillage strategies for rural communities in the Baltic states.

Perhaps the most astonishing display of group power in recent memory, however, has been the spontaneous protests around the Middle East. When the young vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest government corruption and injustice in Tunisia earlier this year, the news spread to other towns via the Arabic language news network *Al Jazeera* and social networking sites, and people took to the streets to overthrow dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The events were a wakeup call to the Arab world.

Though the outcome of the changes in the Middle East is far from certain, what has made some of the movements more successful than others is the unity and innovation of the protest groups, says Abdulkader Sinno, associate professor of political science and Middle Eastern studies at Indiana University. For example, in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, the self-organized youth joined forces with more established political parties and groups like the Muslim Brotherhood to create the critical mass needed to force President Hosni Mubarek to step down.

Islamists and liberals worked together as did youth and older adults. The Muslim Brotherhood brought its expertise in creating barricades, while soccer fans taught people how to combat tear gas and incapacitate police cars. When Mubarek tried to pit fragments of society against one another, the protesters were savvy; Christians protected Muslims while they prayed and vice versa. In Bahrain, by contrast, the government managed to divide people, casting the conflict as Shiite versus Sunni, weakening the movement and causing

infighting among groups, according to the Indiana University’s Sinno.

“During the [Egyptian] revolution, protesters were making sure to convey that everyone was in it together,” Sinno says. “It had nothing to do with religion, age or socioeconomic background.” And the synergy among these groups was powerful, he says: “When words like ‘The people want to bring down the regime’ were being screamed by masses of people together, there was no more backing down.”

Apart from the political and social benefits of participation, groups are also just plain good for you. A growing body of research suggests that being involved in a

Finding *the true*

Want to be an authentic leader? There’s a group

WHILE SOME GROUPS MEET based on quirky interests or community projects, others form specifically to cultivate member self-awareness and human potential. Bill George, a professor at Harvard Business School, teaches an authentic leadership development course that divides students into six-person groups. Members engage in intimate conversations to help each other discover their “true north”—the point at which they’re living in accordance with their most deeply held values and principles.

The groups are modeled after an eight-person men’s group George founded with three others in 1975. He and fellow group founder Doug Baker wrote *True North Groups: A Powerful Path to Personal and Leadership Development* to help others replicate these groups and become more authentic leaders. To this day, every Wednesday at 7 a.m., George, Baker, three former businessmen, two former lawyers and an architect meet in the living room of a Minneapolis church—of which none of the men are still members—to share their life stories, obstacles and intimate secrets for the purpose of gaining perspective and supporting those in need.

“It’s become a vital part of everyone’s life,” George says. “When you’re together that long, you go through a lot of challenges. We’ve gone through life-threatening illnesses, divorce, career changes and a group member’s death. We’ve

experienced problems with children; one group member lost a son. Where do you go when something like that happens?”

For these guys, the answer is easy. They go to Men’s Group—a place for open discussion seldom found in the workplace or even between spouses or social friends. The counsel they receive comes from a variety of perspectives and often results in solutions they wouldn’t have seen on their own.

In interviewing 52 leaders for True North Groups, the authors found that people feel most centered in their leadership when they’re following their true north, which is only possible after cultivating self awareness. True North Groups are structured to develop just that by using a 12-step curriculum to help reframe peoples’ challenges into possibilities. “We ask members to really get down in there and share who they are and how they’ve become who they are,” Baker says. “This gets people out of their heads so they can’t talk about their philosophies or theories; they have to talk about their experiences and life journeys. We find this is crucial to bond people quickly and make them understand that they’re not alone in this journey.”

Unlike typical 12-step programs, True North Groups seek members who are “pretty well buttoned up,” Baker says, noting that needy people suck all the air time and can make other members want

group can lead to significant health benefits, everything from increased happiness and longer life spans to elevated altruism and community involvement.

One famous example of the health benefits of social connection is sociologist Len Syme’s study of heart disease among Japanese people who immigrated to the U.S. Syme found that the rate of heart disease among Japanese men who moved to California was five times greater than the rate of those in Japan, while the rate of those who went to Hawaii was somewhere in between. The results appeared to be independent of the usual risk factors, including smoking, high blood pressure and diet.

north

for that, too.

to quit. The only other requirement is that people are open and honest. All must sign a pledge of confidentiality. Once six to eight members are selected, they meet at least four times a month, usually starting each meeting with a ritual like a prayer or reading followed by a check-in period before an assigned facilitator leads the discussion.

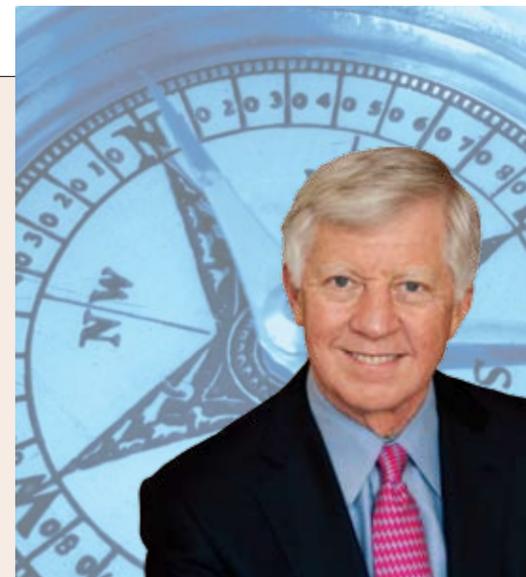
The results have been dramatic, says George. He has worked with more than 2,000 students at Harvard, who often cite the course as the highlight of their business school experience. True North Groups have also impacted hundreds of members of the Young Global Leaders of the World Economic Forum as well as international corporations and other campuses such as New York University and the Georgia Institute of Technology. Most recently, George and Baker started a five-day course for senior executives, which has shown how quickly positive change can happen in the lives and careers of participants.

“There’s something going on in these groups that’s not found elsewhere, certainly not in a traditional classroom or training session,” George says. “Groups are providing the capacity to transform people’s lives, and what is shocking is how fast this can happen. I find in general, there’s a great longing for intimacy; people just don’t know who they can trust or how to find it.”

Not only are such groups good for advice and human connection, they also help people try on new identities throughout their lives, says Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who has

What Syme ultimately concluded was that people with social networks were protected regardless of whether they smoked or had high blood pressure. The Japanese men who moved to California were more isolated than the other two groups, so were more vulnerable to heart disease. More recently, researchers at Columbia University in New York City found that among 655 stroke patients, those who were socially isolated were twice as likely to have another stroke within five years than those with strong relationship ties.

“Connection is the best drug we have against any kind of illness,” says Lynne McTaggart, author of *The Bond:*



THROUGH “TRUE NORTH” GROUPS, BILL GEORGE HELPS MEN CONNECT WITH THEIR MOST DEEPLY HELD VALUES.

been possible without the help of Men’s Group, he says.

Baker’s story is similar. His overcommitment to work was hurting his health and marriage, so when a senior position with American Express surfaced in New York, the group recommended he forego it to focus on repairing these aspects of his life. He’s been coaching, teaching, writing

and traveling ever since. He’s helped start eight True North Groups for young people and is working to establish one for clergy members and another for hospital professionals.

The pair plans to open the True North Groups Institute to bring the concept to more emerging leaders and provide resources—like a help line, an archive of discussion topics, tips for problem solving and a registry of trained facilitators—to meet the growing demand for this kind of support network.

While Men’s Group has evolved from a cadre of ambitious young professionals to a group of friends more concerned with health, retirement and the spiritual questions that come with age, it has been there through and through, and its members say they have become better leaders, not to mention better people, because of the group. “We’ve had some amazing successes; we’ve had a bankruptcy. We’ve had weddings for our children—most of us are grandfathers now. It’s all those lovely and terrible events that can happen in lives that we’ve gone through together as a community,” Baker says. “We’ll meet until every last light goes out.” | S.R.

Connecting Through the Space Between Us, which makes the case that humans are inextricably linked and meant to live in cooperation. “We were made to belong. We were made to be part of a bigger unit than one. And when we’re not, we get ill; we get depressed and we cannot function well.”

McTaggart asserts that many current crises result from selfishness, greed and competitive individualism. She proposes an alternative future led by people working together toward collective goals. Joubert, who has traveled the world for the Global Ecovillage Network, says she has seen just that—people willing to invest time, change

their lifestyles and work hard to serve their communities. The creative intelligence of people, from the architects of Sieben Linden to the youth fueling the Arab spring, continually renews her hope, Joubert says.

“The most underutilized resource we have is the good intentions of citizens and our willingness to make a difference,” she adds. “There are enough wonderful people out there, and if we connect them well, we can shift the whole.” ■

After writing this article, SERENA RENNER is considering joining a non-fiction writer’s meetup group and looking for other ways to get more involved in her community.