

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

From the Selected Works of Frank Shushok Jr.

August, 2016

Community builder Peter Block Talks with Frank Shushok, Jr. about the real meaning of community

Frank Shushok, Jr.



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/frank_shushokjr/52/

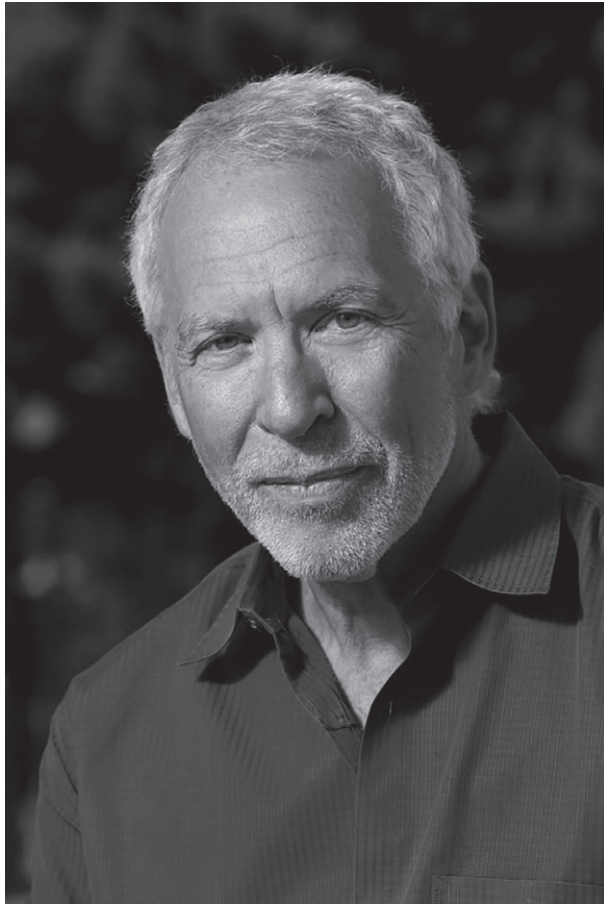
Peter Block is a community organizer and author who is committed to community and connection. Read on for his unique perspective on challenging the status quo.

Peter Block Talks Community, the Consumer Culture, and the Promise of Learning with Executive Editor, Frank Shushok, Jr.

PETER BLOCK HAS GIVEN HIS LIFE TO HELPING organizations, institutions, and communities build social capital. His efforts these days center in Cincinnati, OH, where Peter lives with his wife, Cathy Kramer. He is engaged in developing a civic engagement network called A Small Group, plus a series of other projects working to build the capacity of his urban community to value its gifts and see its own possibility. He is also working with his friend, Walter Brueggemann, and others in the Economics of Compassion Initiative of Greater Cincinnati, which supports alternative economic systems marked by justice, community, and relationship. He is the author of eight books, including *Community: The Structure of Belonging* and, released this year, *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture*.

Shushok: *Peter, I really appreciate you taking time to visit. Many of us have read your book, Community: The Structure of Belonging and I recently finished your new book with Walter Brueggemann and John McKnight, An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture which I found fascinating. We will talk about these shortly. To begin our time together, however, I'd love for you to share some of your life journey, and especially how you discovered your passion for helping people develop, nurture, and sustain community.*

Block: Like all of us, I wondered whether I could make a living and do something useful at the same time. School led me to think the answer was “no” because the whole movement in schools has been toward practicality. Everyone knows that engineers



PETER BLOCK OFFERS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE CONSUMER CULTURE.

and computer science people make a living and everyone else gets in debt.

What occurred to me in graduate school was that I had found something to do that I love, and that I could make a living at, and that was the field of organizational development. So when I was about 20 or 21 years old, I found something to care about, other than getting by and making a living. I also found that I could learn more about myself. I had big questions like: Will I always be such a jerk? Will I always be alone? Will I always feel like an outsider? I wanted to answer these questions through the work that I did. So my own belief is that my profession is a form of healing, a therapy perhaps.

The touchstones of my career have been driven by my curiosity, and I've always been drawn to the edge of things, the margin of things. The conventional wisdom

has always made me nervous, and too much comfort and safety always made me anxious.

I always found teachers. Every time I read a book or found something that changed my mind, I would write people and ask, "Can I come and learn from you?" I suppose I constructed my own education, which I think is what you and *About Campus* are trying to do—to help students and teachers love learning and not be distracted by "school" and all our anxious desires to control. The predictability schools so often want to construct, the core competencies and core curricula and all the "we know and you don't mentality" is so detrimental to learning.

Later, I think I just got lucky. I worked for a big company, and I quit and started my own business. I had a set of ideas and every seven years I've learned I need to find a new set of ideas to explore. I found teachers in surprising places. I learned about gestalt theory and learning theory, for example, from a tennis instructor. When I was 40, I ran into an existential philosopher who became my friend and told me that my unique anxiety and pathology (things I thought were wrong with me) were simply being human. He lifted a burden off of me since I thought I was destined to spend my life working on myself as a project to fix. Whatever you think your problem is, he said, it's just your humanity. This was a huge shift for me and my thinking.

Then I found other people. I found community people; after working 30 years with institutions, I kind of de-institutionalized myself. I found that the civic space—the space of the common good—put me in touch with people who cared about something, who were committed to something. The real challenge in our lives, I think, is not only to find something we care about but also to find people who care about something. I don't care what it is, but most people are kind of happy just making a living. I need something more and people who need something more.

In the first half of life, I wanted to *do* something. I have been spending these last years discovering interesting ideas, learning about them, and becoming a translator of these ideas for others. People ask me what I do in the world. In summary, I say take ideas from all different places, whether it's economics, journalism, architecture, art or philosophy, and translate them and make them accessible to people. And, when I was about 45 years old, I discovered I could write and that was a big surprise too.

Shushok: *In listening to you describe your life unfolding; it sounds like your teachers were often surprises, frequently not teachers in any formal capacity. It also seems like these were people who helped you uncover new parts of yourself and facilitated new think-*

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Frank Shushok Jr. (aboutcampus@vt.edu), and please copy him on notes to authors.

ing or a shift in your perspective. Being able to change one's mind is such an important disposition these days as too often we humans become so entrenched in a particular way of thinking about the world. When this occurs, our approach can too often be to convince others with differing views that their perspective is wrong. I am wondering if you could talk about something in your life where you changed your mind.

Block: I think the tension, the paradox, is between wanting safety and predictability—some people want to know, “what does the future hold?” I get the question asked all the time, “What’s next?” I have one answer: I have no idea.

My friend Peter Koestenbaum is an informal teacher who shifted my thinking. I always thought that I needed to work on my weaknesses, and that’s how I’d get better in life. Peter turned that upside down and taught me that I am not a collection of deficiencies, not a collection of weaknesses, but a human being. This was so liberating and helped me realize that loneliness, anxiety, and feeling empty and meaningless sometimes are qualities of being human. This is not a problem to be solved. It was a big deal for me to let that go.

My tennis coach, Tim Gallwey, who I mentioned earlier, changed my mind about learning. I was in my twenties and working hard on my game—working so hard that I gave it up. It wasn’t fun. All I wanted to do was to win. Tim shifted my thinking and helped me discover that awareness about what you are doing, not outcomes and performance, is what makes you a better player.

Tim also made the distinction between teaching and learning, so he would teach people to play tennis and never give them an instruction. That is, he would hand them a racket and say, “Hold this. Thank you.” He would never tell them how to hold the racket. So, he inverted the idea that expert knowledge is useful to a belief that your body, mind and soul know what it needs to know. Just be aware of your body, mind, and soul and trust it. I became a better tennis player, and it changed my mind about learning altogether.

As a consultant, this new thinking made me question the value of both expertise and certainty. What we see so frequently in the world is a longing for certainty. Presidential candidate Donald Trump has one message, and it’s “I will keep you safe.” That is selling well, at least in the media. I’m not sure if in our souls it sells well.

My friend John McKnight says that there is no use in describing people according to their deficiencies, which means as soon as you call somebody “disabled,” “homeless,” “poor,” “youth at risk,” “single parent,” “single mom,” (all that language which generates

compassion and charity), you are being unkind to the human beings you are discussing.

The alternative is to focus on people’s gifts, and I went, “Wow!” I got interested. Now don’t get me wrong, I struggle with horrible habits of judgment and labeling, but all of a sudden, an organizing principle of my life became, “What are these people good at?” In my community work, I’m not interested in what’s wrong. I want to know: “What do you like to do? What are you good at? What are you willing to teach other people?”

As soon as you ask people that question, you decolonize them. To ask people what their deficiencies are, and to create a whole system of higher education that talks about people’s weaknesses, is a form of colonization. Most of our schools are designed to domesticate us, to socialize us, to make us docile. That is scary to me; those are seeds in the soil of a totalitarian instinct. That’s what scares me about fundamentalism, that’s why people are leaving churches—because they realize the certainty the church offered is not useful. So, all those are deep changes in my thinking.

We can, by purchasing better police, schools, and health care, raise our children safe from harm and in good health.

Shushok: *You’ve offered me a great segue into talking about your new book, *An Other Kingdom*, with Walter Brueggemann and John McKnight. I found it a blistering critique of a prevailing ideology in our country, and you offer a bold invitation to depart what you call, “the consumer market culture.” Can you share with About Campus readers why you wrote this book?*

Block: I keep trying to make sense of the world and find meaning in it. I don’t want to spend my life angry, or upset, or apathetic, or withdrawn. So I said, “Is there something going on here that we don’t have language for?” I’m not interested in arguing against the so-called 1 percent. There is something deeper going on. The notion of the good life seems to be disappearing for us. The middle class is disappearing. You start to think, “Is there something going on here deeper than the conversations we are now having?” I believe it’s the definition of the “good life.” I realized we have come to the point in this culture where we think we can buy *anything*. We can, by purchasing better

police, schools, and health care, raise our children safe from harm and in good health.

It is really the commercialization of the soul. That's really what Walter would say. He's an Old Testament scholar and brought with him the language of the Old Testament, which conveys that what we're talking about has a history; it's not just a critique of modern society. The Exodus story, which is the foundation of most western religions, was a departure from a Pharaoh's economy, a predatory economy, similar to the one in which we are living now. Right now, we believe that whatever we have is not enough.

I just saw an ad from the "Vision Council," which is probably an industry group selling glasses. It begins by saying, "Most women have an average of 27 pairs of shoes, and only one pair of glasses. Something's wrong here." Well, they think the something wrong is that women don't have 27 pairs of glasses!

So, our book is trying to give voice to an alternative to the consumer culture. I think it's what has us experiencing a lot of suffering and a lot of violence. We try to be docile and gentle in the book, but if you look at ISIS, for example, or the violence in our own culture (which is one of the most violent of all cultures), it's produced by the consumer culture, by the notion that, "If I don't have it, I am going to get it! And if I don't have it, I'm mad at the people who do."

If you go back in history and look at industrialization, it occurred from armies conquering countries to create markets. We didn't talk about that much in the book because John and Walter aren't that interested in that; but for my next book, I'm going to write about how violence comes out of these beliefs.

Now the world has decided that America is no longer the role model. They are angry at the American materialist mode. The fundamentalist Islamic world says, "We don't want that future." So, that's the one part of them that I understand. They are saying they don't want to be westernized; they don't want to be colonized economically.

Shushok: *Let me take you to a particular section in your book that is especially germane to us, and that's where you address the corporatization of schools and the increasing disposition, in particular at colleges and universities, to be marketplace driven. What concerns you about the condition of American education? And how optimistic are you that the current trajectory can be reversed?*

Block: Those are different questions so let me start with the first one. Most funding in faculty research, business schools, and all sorts of places now comes from corporations. Most people have to get grants and where do they get them? We've stopped funding the liberal education of our children as a

culture. California used to have free higher education, but now they are saying "we can't afford that." Well, we can afford anything if we can afford to declare war. So, it's not that we can't afford it. We don't want to afford it.

Now there's the core curriculum, there's a certain set of learnings that every student ought to have. Well, that's the centralization of teaching. That makes me nervous. The whole liberal arts area is just struggling versus the business schools, engineering schools, and the science and math agendas. Most of these efforts are private sector designs to off-load the cost of education into the public sector; the cost of teaching becomes corporate-driven. "We are here to find jobs for our future."

Technology; I think is great, it's fine—I like telephones, I like cars, I like computers, but the notion they are substitutes for connection, for depth, that's what I'm struggling to comprehend.

What happened to art? It's gone from public education. What happened to music? If anyone gets a degree in English or any liberal arts, it is a real adventure, culturally speaking. The whole purpose of higher education, which started as religious institutions, was to prepare people to be citizens, to be learners, to be curious about life, to have memories, to have some sense of story and history and narrative because that's what drives us as humans.

It scares me to professionalize the souls of my children. What bothers me is not only the professionalization of our children's lives but to turn them into commodities.

A friend of mine teaches social justice, and he was tolerated because he had been at his university for 34 years. Then he was told to teach his social justice courses online. He said, "I don't think I can teach what I'm teaching online." They then had no place for him. He felt online is the substitution of convenience for depth and intimacy.

Technology; I think is great, it's fine—I like telephones, I like cars, I like computers, but the notion they are substitutes for connection, for depth, that's

what I'm struggling to comprehend. If you care about the soul, capacity, and the learning abilities of college students, one has to question the standardization of the student experience. Even service learning doesn't include much service these days; it's just cheap labor. Internships, most unpaid, become a kind of wage slavery. But we choose it as a device: "If you'll intern with us, maybe you'll get a job out of it."

Shushok: *I get the sense in your book that deep in there, you have a hope or a belief that things can be reversed. Is that true? Are you optimistic?*

Block: Thank you for that. You know, I would make a huge distinction between optimism and faith. I began this work in the 1960s and began community work in the 1990s. So if you ask me, "Do you think things have gotten better?" My response is, "Not particularly." People in the workplace are more afraid than they have ever been. Students are more obsessive than they ever were. Students are more anxious, and their parents—my God! Parents raise their children by constructing a child management service and call it parenting.

I have grandchildren whose lives are totally managed—I thought my daughter was overdoing it, but she's not—she's the norm. When I grew up, I went to school and then I decided what to do until dinner was on. Nobody was managing me. It's not because I lived in a safe neighborhood. These neighborhoods (now) are not unsafe; it's just a mindset. So, I don't even find it useful to say are you optimistic or not, or pessimistic, either one. It's just a longing to predict the future—useless.

Part of our book is to trying to bring back the idea of mystery. What makes life interesting is its unknowability. There are certain questions where there is no answer, no matter how much research you do. Brain research is trying to make the soul predictable, trying to explain my capacity for love or depression by where it occurs inside my brain. It's interesting, you know, but *Mad Max* is interesting. So, I would just stop the question of optimism and talk instead about faith.

**There are certain questions
where there is no answer,
no matter how much research
you do.**

I have enormous faith. I never question what's possible, and I never wonder "will I see it or not?" I don't care—I'm uninterested—in outcomes and results. Now, I feel bad about that. I look back over all these

years and say, "so, what difference has it made?" And the answer is not satisfactory. It's just not, but I have great faith. I think what we are asking for is for people to have faith in our humanity and in possibility, mystery, miracles, silence, and relationships. I think that's what propels me, never lose faith. Never. And the nice thing about faith is you don't need evidence. You don't have to benchmark and don't have to ask the question, "Where is faith working?" I've always believed in one-shot conditioning; I think if you see something *once*, it doesn't have to be replicated to be true.

Shushok: *You know, after reading An Other Kingdom, I couldn't help but think that some of the big ideas you are proposing could best survive if they were enacted in community. That brought me back to your original book, Community, The Structure of Belonging, which I value in so many ways. The notion of community is often discussed in higher education circles, but I get the sense, however, that the word "community" is often used but a lot less understood. I'm wondering if you can offer some insight from your vantage point about the mechanics of community. What does it look like? Under what conditions is it most likely to develop and flourish?*

Block: You know, "community" has become a market word. Everybody wants to build community. Proctor and Gamble called and said, "We want to create a community out of women who buy our diapers." So it has become modified in that way; there are elements of a commercial venture. Now, that's fine, I like Proctor and Gamble, I want them to sell diapers. But community means that you and I together can produce something, can construct a new future together. It means that we need each other, in fact. Neighborliness is not about liking each other. Neighborliness means that if I want to be safe, or raise a child, or be healthy, or make a living, I need you in order to best do that.

Now community in the classroom isn't the old fashioned "we're all learning at the same time." It means if I am going to learn anything in this classroom, I'm going to learn it from the other students. I'm not going to learn it from the teacher. I'm going to get information and expertise from the teacher, and I'm glad the teacher has that. But I don't care if teachers are entertaining or not; I don't want to rate my teacher as the cause of my learning. I would stop teacher evaluations, too, because it just makes them nervous and cautious.

What I would do is take a class and say, "If we want community in the classroom it means we are going to learn and produce learning for each other. We are going to do things together. We are going to construct, in a sense, our way of learning in this class, whether it's math or otherwise." There's a wise person

who says, “The purpose for math classroom is to help people learn how to be together, in the presence of a math teacher” or whatever the content, I don’t care how scientific. Community is about our real interdependence, our need for each other, our capacity to produce and construct something together. It’s not about like-mindedness. Like-mindedness is a marketing term in that I want to gather like-minded people in one place so I don’t spend so much time on advertising (so I can target my request to them).

So, community is about interdependence. I would call it authentic community. That’s what I try to write about in the book—to be quiet, to have time for each other, to not ever think “I know who you are.” I want to make something with people in my community. Make learning. Make a neighborhood. Make a safe place.

Shushok: *Can you give me an example of a community from your own life or a community that you think is really working?*

Block: We have a neighborhood where I live and I’m a council member. We are trying to figure out how to keep the business district going, so I get together with these people. Everybody has their own point of view, but it’s nice to be with people who want to know about the neighborhood—want to know about zoning, the business district, what to do with deer (there are too many deer there, there’s a park nearby). To me, anything that builds social capital, any time you have neighbors getting together to talk about what they can create together, is enormously successful, even if they argue all the time.

So you have this under the radar. The news never reports about what works in the world, the news reports about what’s dangerous in the world—the curriculum of the news and your criminology department, wherever you are, is about what is wrong with the world.

Community can be small things. There are coffee shops now where people meet every Wednesday morning from 9 to 11; that to me is an enormously powerful community. The business perspective demands scale, and it says if it doesn’t happen in the large, it doesn’t count. Well, I don’t want to live by the business model. That’s what our book is about. I want to live on an intimate level; I want the scale to be slow and small. I want depth over speed.

There’s a friend of mine who wrote a song about the *Community* book, Randy Weeks (you can look him up on YouTube). He and I were involved in A Small Group; we created a kind of association in Cincinnati. We have about 800 people in it. It’s called “A Small Group.” We get together once in a while, and the whole purpose was to say, “Let’s come together and change the narrative.” That’s what that book was really about.

Most schools, especially in high school and in grade school, the people who sweep the floor do as much teaching as anybody else in the place. Every first year teacher in high school spends the first semester crying after the children are gone. Who cares for that teacher? Well, the janitor does!

Most schools, especially in high school and in grade school, the people who sweep the floor do as much teaching as anybody else in the place.

So that’s what you are doing with *About Campus*. At those moments when it offers a narrative, a kind of shift, it says, “we are here to learn, and the students are in charge of that learning.” And Wiley is smart enough to know that. Those are your best moments. Your worst moments are when you are there to celebrate the beauty and elegance and expertise of higher education.

Shushok: *I want to switch back to An Other Kingdom. Perhaps one of my favorite moments was reading your acknowledgements, particularly your acknowledgement about Wiley publisher Matt Holt. You wrote that Matt considered your book, and you agreed, as somewhat weird. It struck me that your ideas are no doubt counter-cultural, but how do you think about your own ideas? As weird?*

Block: I feel guilty because I’ve made a good living out of common sense. Most people say, “Well this is just common sense.” I say, “I know. When did common sense become so radical?” Really I mean that students learn more from each other than they do from the teacher. It’s not that complex, and it’s true. So, this is what you are dealing with. I was just having a drink with Matt. He likes me because I wrote a book that sold. I said, “I have this other book,” and he said, “Well, let me see it!” I didn’t know what the book was about—it was my seventh draft. Walter and John and I are great friends, so we just kind of talked this thing into existence. I kept asking myself, “What is this book about?” Then I gave it to Matt, and he said, “Yes, we will publish it.” Damn! That’s all I needed. Then he said, “Once in a while we publish a weird book, and this is it.” I thought, “You’re on! I’ll take that.”

Having thoughts that go against the culture produces enormous loneliness. So do independence and being a pioneer. You and your group are pioneers in the world in which you are operating. If you weren't, you wouldn't be having this conversation. Most college-related folks have not called me. So there's a loneliness to being a pioneer, you always look around and say, "What's the matter with me?" That's why we need each other. That's why you have five people in the room (and to realize you are not crazy).

By the way, I have three things that I want to say to college students to understand: Consider what you're good at! Most people graduate college not knowing what they are good at. The second is that you are not alone, regardless of your story. And the third is that you're not crazy. There's nothing wrong with you! You spend your life learning that and re-experiencing it.

Shushok: *I have two last questions for you. I've shared with you a little bit about the mission of About Campus in advancing student learning, and so we are always interested in perspectives that help educators nurture the most robust conditions for learning on college and university campuses. You've talked a lot about this today. I want to give you one more opportunity to speak directly to the hearts of people working with students every day and who are hopeful for the kind of things you have articulated here today. What kind of wisdom, counsel, or advice would you offer?*

Block: I would just say, "God bless you." It's hard work. Half of your students don't care about what you are teaching. A third of them are looking at a flat thing at some level that they have in their hand, some kind of supposed connection device. Kurt Vonnegut said there used to be a theory that if you gave 100 monkeys a typewriter and enough time, they would write Shakespeare. He said Facebook proves that theory wrong.

So, I have no wisdom. People say sometimes that this is a waste of time. They are probably right, but that doesn't mean you should stop doing it. You are inheriting the woundedness and anxiety of a culture in your classroom, and you don't have much time. So God bless you for doing what you're doing. Most faculty in higher education are so alienated from the institution, and it makes no sense to them, and they get alienated from each other too. They think they are there to compete.

I can remember being at Harvard once years ago, helping a professor teach a class. He was cranky that other professors weren't interested in his class. I thought, my God, you are in heaven. Look at the stained glass windows. You have roast beef for lunch. I

had never seen a college or any school with roast beef for lunch, prime rib no less! So I realized what a hard culture higher education is. It's alienating and isolating. Once in a while, in your department, you find a pocket of collaboration, intimacy, connection. So I am just thankful that people will take that on, stay alive, stay connected, and stay with it.

I encourage all of us to be surprised and to start over again every seven years.

Shushok: *Well Peter, now I'm just talking personally. I had a student, maybe seven years ago, give me a copy of your book, Community. He was an undergraduate student, and said, "Hey Frank, I think you will believe in this book." So I read it, and I bet you I have bought 300 copies of your book personally.*

Block: Thank you.

Shushok: *People all over my campus have read the book. I think so many of those ideas are accessible; they're common sense but they're counter-cultural. I just wanted to tell you what an impact you've had on my campus and me. I'm also a proponent of the strengths movement, thinking about what's right with people, and so your words truly resonate with me. I want to thank you for the way that you've influenced my thinking.*

You know, it's a great paradox between free will, which nobody wants to own up (we all think we are caused by our parents, which is the best argument not to have children), and "the culture did it," and both are true. But underneath that is free will and a capacity for us to connect and be close.

Block: You know, it's a great paradox between free will, which nobody wants to own up (we all think we are caused by our parents, which is the best argument not to have children), and "the culture did it," and both

are true. But underneath that is free will and a capacity for us to connect and be close.

Shushok: *Peter, it's been an enormous gift to talk to you, and thank you for making time to do this. Thanks to Maggie too for her help in making it happen. We are truly grateful.*

Block: Thank you, and bless you. It was wonderful for me.

NOTES

Block, P. (2009). *Community: The structure of belonging*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Block, P., Brueggemann, W., & McKnight, J. (2006). *An other kingdom: Departing the consumer culture*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.