

# What's Broken is the We

— *some thoughts on creativity for the common good*

by vivian Hutchinson

vivian Hutchinson is a community activist and social entrepreneur. He is the author of *How Communities Heal — stories of social innovation and social change* (2012), and a trustee and convener of Community Taranaki. This paper is based on his keynote speech given to the *New Zealand Creativity Challenge* held in New Plymouth 27-28 April 2013.

"If we want to change the nature of our communities, then we need to change the nature of the conversations we are having with one another." — Peter Block

1.

I'm here to talk about "*creativity for the common good*". But first of all, I want to tell you about a movie I was watching during the Christmas holidays.

It was a fairly standard gangster movie starring Brad Pitt as the hit man and it also had James Gandolfini who played Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos* and Richard Jenkins who played the father in *Six Foot Under*.

I suppose I liked the movie, but I wouldn't really recommend it. It was just so very violent. Like many movies of this type it seemed to be a splatter-fest of blood and gore and brutality. But hey, it was a gangster movie, and for some reason there's a lot of people who seem to find that sort of thing relaxing on a Sunday night.

Anyway, I don't think I'll spoil the plot for you if I tell you that it was about two rather dim-witted and drugged-up young criminals who decided to rob a secret high-stakes card game that had much of the gangland establishment as its playing customers.

They did the robbery, and as it turns out, the top gangsters didn't really like being on the receiving end of this theft. So they put out a contract and enlisted an elite assassin (Brad Pitt).

What interested me about this movie was that while these young dim-wits were planning their robbery, the edge of the movie screen always seemed to have a radio or a television on with a 24-hour news





programme like CNN or Fox News. The film was set in 2008 during the time when the US economy was in freefall and politicians like Bush and Obama and McCain were at crisis meetings with all the banking and insurance CEOs, or holding press conferences as they scrambled to put together a bailout.

What was going on in these TV screens wasn't part of the main gangster story. It was just a side-order for your attention. But as you waded your way through the details and the characters involved in the robbery of the card-game ... you slowly started to become aware that *another* heist was also taking place. And this wasn't a heist set in a fictional gangland. It was the very real heist of public money to keep propping up a financial system that was corrupt and remains fundamentally broken today.



At the end of the movie we get a scene with Brad Pitt sitting at a late-night bar trying to get his contract money out of Richard Jenkins. And sure enough, there's a TV set over the bar, and Obama is giving another rousing speech about "We're all in this together!"

Brad Pitt points to Obama on the TV and says:

*"... That guy wants to tell me that we are living in a community. But I don't live in a community. I'm living in America. And in America, you're on your own. America is not a country ... it's just business."*

2.

So, it's Sunday night and it's just a movie.

But for the rest of the week I often have the feeling that it's not just a movie ... and that more and more of our days are lived in this place that Brad Pitt's character is describing. Certainly more and more of our movies and TV serials, and even our news programmes, are telling the stories that are set in this same place.



This "not-a-country" is everywhere you have the very similar commercial, industrial, bureaucratic and political landscape where "it's just business" and you're on your own ... and everyone has sharp elbows, because it is every man and woman for themselves.

But I wouldn't call this place America, because it is as much in our minds as it is increasingly in all our places. And anyway, I've got far too many American friends and there's nothing wrong with their elbows.

But if there was a name for this place-of-mind , it would be similar.

You might call it *Generica*.

*Generica* is ruled by the appetites of the consumer and a culture of commerce that has a vested interest in keeping those appetites unsatisfied.

In *Generica*, the sacrament is shopping.

I'm not that much of a shopper, but I have been to the malls in Glasgow, and Zurich, and Hong Kong, and Sydney and Seattle ... and they all look pretty much the same. All those shops could almost be in the same country.

They make me think of that line in the James K. Baxter poem where he is talking about the City of Auckland in 1970s and, with his own particular whinge of anger and despair, he compares it to an elephant's backside, and says:

*I would take a trip to another town  
Except that the other towns resemble you exactly.*



3.

I've spent most of my adult life fighting for the life of *community* in the face of the growing colonisation and encroachment of this *Generica*.

I am a *community* activist, and I have also been described as a social entrepreneur. In my work, over the last 40 years, I've tried to have a positive impact on the community issues of social justice, race relations, economic development and philanthropy.

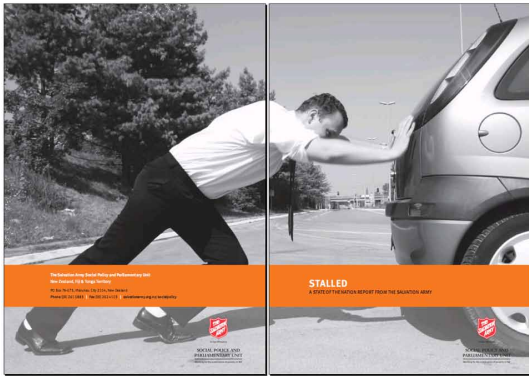
I've had some success in the craft of "making a difference". For me, this has included working on land rights protests, creating programmes for training and supporting the unemployed, fostering social entrepreneurship and social innovation, and trying to awaken more active citizenship and generosity in our communities.

Amidst all this work I've also had plenty of frustrations and complete failures — in what the creative people at this conference would describe as "... opportunities to learn".

People who are working in the community and social services sectors in this country are getting plenty of "... opportunities to learn" at the moment. In the current political and economic climate, it is actually quite a difficult time for making a difference on our most basic community issues.

Whether we are talking about addressing the growing gap between rich and poor, or the need for more affordable housing, the need for good paid employment (especially for our young people), or the need to clean up problems in our health system or education systems, or the need to work for a cleaner and greener environment ... it feels like the overall progress and development on almost all of these issues is going nowhere.

Sure, there are good news and success stories that many of us in the community sector are involved with, and justifiably proud of. But let's step back and ask ourselves: In the current political and economic climate, are we making real overall progress on



our basic social and environmental issues? Is the sum of our work really making a difference?

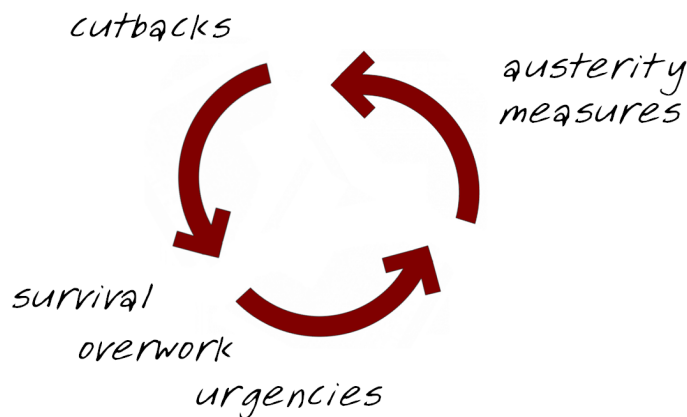
Our colleagues at The Salvation Army run an excellent research unit which keeps track of the overall progress we are making on community issues. And the cover of one of their recent *State of the Nation* reports really sums it up. It tells us that when it comes to progress and development, then things are pretty much stalled.

That financial crash back in 2008 was the worst economic collapse we've had in three generations. It didn't just take place on our movie screens and the 24-hr news channels. It was a very real event that took \$14 trillion out of the world economic system, and its consequences have washed up on the shores of our most vulnerable communities.

Almost everywhere in the developed world, the response has been cut-backs and austerity measures.

Here in New Zealand, successive years of zero government budget increases has brought its own dulling brutality. It has had a huge impact on our community sector — putting back our developmental work by over a generation — as people, families, and critical organisations have been thrown into survival strategies.

People in the public and community sectors seem to be going to meetings where we are being told we have to live with less funding in an ongoing regime of austerity. It is a situation that hasn't always brought out the best in us ... and we've all heard plenty of stories of community groups either going to the wall and closing down, or fighting over the scraps that are left.



4.

This is what many of my colleagues in the community sector tell me is the reality of their days. It's a vicious circle. It starts with the political intention to cut spending. This puts community groups into survival mode where good-hearted people end up over-working in order to make ends meet. And we all end up constantly distracted by urgencies and never thinking about the deeper strategies which could have a much longer-term impact. It's an unsustainable picture ... and it is a picture that is now the norm in our sector.

But I'm not here to whinge. I just find it somewhat ironic to be told by fully funded bureaucrats, many of whom on six-figure salaries and secure jobs, that their departments are *broke*, and those of us in the public and community sectors will need to be much more entrepreneurial and creative with what we've got.

Forgive me if I do not completely buy that story.

I still have this rather annoying picture in my peripheral vision that says there is a very real *heist* taking place here. And yes, I am certainly ready to be entrepreneurial and creative in my response to *that* vision.

You see, I don't really believe that we are *broke*.

I think that what's *broken* here ... is the "We".

5.

Wayne Morris has done a particularly interesting thing with this conference. He's called it the *New Zealand Creativity Challenge*, but he hasn't just invited the artists and musicians who we normally think of as the "creative types". He put out a clear call to people in business, people working in city councils and government departments, and people working in our community groups — to come and pick up that challenge.

On the first flyer for this conference, Wayne quoted from Sir Ken Robinson, who is an international adviser on education and the arts, and whose talks on creativity at the TED conferences have been widely circulating on the internet. Robinson points out that the challenges we face in society today are without precedent:

*" ... More people live on this planet now than at any other time in history. The world's population has doubled in the past 30 years. We're facing an increasing strain on the world's natural resources. Technology is advancing at a headlong rate of speed. It's transforming how people work, think, and connect. It's transforming our cultural values. This is really new, and we're going to need every ounce of ingenuity, imagination, and creativity to confront these problems." — Sir Ken Robinson*



Activating every ounce of ingenuity, imagination, and creativity is the "challenge" part that this conference is taking to the rest of New Zealand. And Wayne and many others here are teaching us a great deal about how to get on with this challenge, and how to be smarter about the process of our creativity.

I believe that getting smarter about the process of creativity is going to be fundamentally important to all our activities in building the resilience and regenerating our communities at this time. And we're not going to solve our problems with the same type of thinking that created these problems in the first place.

Those of us working in the community sector need to get out of our issue-based silos and come to events like this and take the time to be amongst people who are not used to being together and start having the conversations that lead to new possibilities.

From my point of view, the place where our creativity is most needed right now, is at the very heart of our communities and how we address our basic social and

environmental challenges. Perhaps it is even deeper than that. The creativity that we need right now is a creativity that can foster and support the very idea of *community* itself.

That's my challenge to this conference and also what I have come here to learn more about.

creativity for the  
common good  
  
the creativity of We

In a *broken* world, in the face of a *Generica* that is telling us that “it’s just business” and we are on our own, that it’s every man or woman for themselves ... we need to unleash and sustain the creativity of “We”.

6.

Over the last seven years I have been working with a group of people from around the country who have been trying to do just that.

The New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship has been a group of active citizens who have been working to bring insight and entrepreneurship and practical hope to many projects and activities for social change in our communities around the country.

We came together as a three-year fellowship which was originally initiated and funded by philanthropy. After that three years we have stayed loosely connected — probably because we are still learning quite a bit from one another.

The people in this group have been active in all sorts of areas — from affordable housing to working in the prisons, to job creation, to working with young people, or working with disabled people and their families, or addressing family violence, or the issue of problem gambling, or creating eco-neighbourhoods.

While we were chosen by the philanthropic groups as people who were leaders in our fields, I would be the first to say that there is nothing special about this group of people. Every community in New Zealand has people who are doing this sort of work. It is just that we are living in a culture that does not tell their stories.

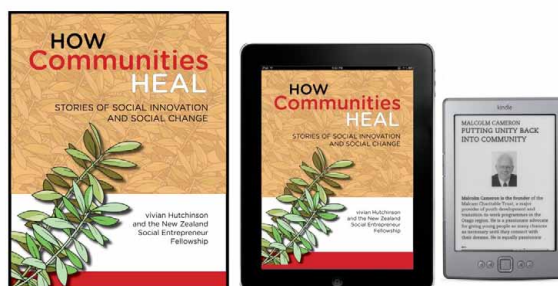
Perhaps we should be asking: Why is it that the stories of our politicians, our entertainers, and our sports-people are so much better known than the stories and examples of our community activists?

We do not hear enough about their work, and the complexity of the issues that these activists are trying to address. Nor do we hear enough about the particular type of creativity these people are bringing to social change.



This is one reason why in the last year I published a book telling the personal stories of this particular group of social entrepreneurs, and also a bit about what we have been learning together as a group.

The book is called *How Communities Heal*, and you can buy a copy from our website. Also on the website, you can freely read and download each individual chapter about these activists and their projects.



7.

What is common to each of the social entrepreneurs is that these are people who are particularly pragmatic and creative about the “We”.

Here’s a few examples ...

Brian Donnelly has been trying to answer the question: How do we make housing affordable in these difficult economic times? New Zealand has one of the least affordable housing markets in the world, and the high cost of housing is a major contributor to poverty. We have something like one-in-twenty households living in damp and crowded conditions.

In his work with the New Zealand Housing Foundation, Brian is not only leading the building and development of whole sub-divisions like the one he is working on in Glen Eden, but he is also establishing a shared home ownership programme.

This is where a low-income family can raise a mortgage for 75% of the value of the house, while the rest of it is owned and retained by the Housing Foundation. In terms of equity, this gives a low-income family access to a community, and everything else that means in terms of social security.

The Housing Foundation, or some other philanthropic trust, leaves their money in on a rent-free and interest-free basis. This sort of funding arrangement is fairly common in the United Kingdom and in other countries, but it is an innovation here in the housing market in New Zealand.

The creative challenge for a social entrepreneur like Brian is to mobilise the social capital that will make this happen, and in effect establish a market for affordable housing.

I think Brian’s work has particular relevance to us here in Taranaki.

Our local TSB Bank likes to support and brand itself on all our major community resources. It is a big player in terms of our local social capital. It prides itself on being an independent New Zealand-owned bank. It makes its money on our mortgages, and it even has its own real estate company ... but it has no strategy for affordable housing.

This in itself is an opportunity for creativity and for leadership in this province.



8.

Another member of our Fellowship, Stephanie McIntyre, is Director of the Downtown Community Ministry and is working amongst the homeless in Wellington's inner city.

People with long histories of alcohol dependence as well as homelessness are one of the hardest groups to care for in our community. These are people who often have failed at rehabilitation many times, and they are now trapped in a fairly predictable cycle that goes from sleeping rough on the streets, to dossing down on other people's couches, or in the night shelters, to finding themselves ending up in police cells or in various hospital emergency departments.

This group of people actually costs our communities a lot of money in terms of the charity and policing and emergency services they end up being customers for. And despite all the different schemes and rehabilitation programmes they have been on, sometimes over decades, as a group these people have consistently remained without a roof over their heads.



Stephanie's creativity has been in her advocacy. She has championed a "Housing First" policy for these people, based on the idea that having shelter is a primary human right, and not a reward for your sobriety.

She has been working to establish a "wet house" in Wellington, where this group of people can have a roof over their heads while they keep on sorting out their issues. There's been some opposition to this, particularly from the potential neighbourhoods where this house might be situated. But a lot of this has been a question of ignorance and misunderstanding in the media, and the public, about how these houses are run and their practical rehabilitative focus.

Yet Stephanie's particular creative challenge has been to look at this difficult group of people – a group we all see sleeping on the street – and keep thinking: "We".

It is a challenge which is embraced by the Downtown Community Ministry, where they have a policy of appointing "service users" as staff members. As well as the foodbank and the housing and health support services, DCM also hosts a bunch of programmes and activities which are designed to get the homeless connected with the rest of our community, and reinforces the message that they are not on their own.

There is a ukulele orchestra that is made up of homeless people, and DCM staff members have also got involved in the Homeless World Cup movement which uses street soccer tournaments to build connections through teamwork, and then supports people on their pathways to rehabilitation.

DCM has had to be particularly creative in fundraising to support their programmes which have not always been seen as attractive to the mainstream funders.



One of the things they are well known for in Wellington is that they run the annual 24-hr second-hand book fair at the TSB Arena on the Wellington waterfront.

9.

Ngahau and Debbie Davis are here at this conference, with a large team from their different projects in the community of Moerewa, in Northland.

Ngahau and Debbie are serial social entrepreneurs, and they are doing their work in one of the economically poorest areas of New Zealand.

With their group, *He Iwi Kotahi Tatou Trust*, they have been setting up social services for families, running training and mentoring programmes for young people, establishing community-owned enterprises ... and generally reviving their town and local area.



One of reasons that Ngahau and Debbie and their group are here is because all of their work is absolutely driven by the notion of creativity, and by a belief in the healing power that comes with releasing the creative spirit.

The message of creativity is fundamentally important to their social change work. This is why they have also established a recording studio in their town, and are involved in multi-media and film productions.

Their young people are faced with an education system that is failing them, and a job market that has no use for them. The response of *He Iwi Kotahi Tatou* has been to keep building on and running with the creativity of their next generation.

Their work reminds me of what the British economist E.F. Schumacher once said about unemployment:

*"The in-born creativity of all people is no mean or accidental thing. Neglect it, and it becomes an inner source of poison. On the other hand, nothing can stop the flowering of a society that manages to give free rein to the creativity of all its people..."*  
— E.F. Schumacher, author of *Good Work* (1979)



10.

Ngahau and Debbie have also taken up the challenge of what happens to a people when stifled creativity does become an inner source of poison.

Yesterday, together with Judge James Rota, Whaea Irene Hancy and Lorene Royal, they ran a *Community Korero* workshop at *Tu Tama Wahine o Taranaki* on their most recent work in establishing alternatives to the fact that so many people in our jails are Maori.

*Te Mana o Ngapuhi Kowhau Rau* is a new Ngapuhi response to Maori offending that has the goal of making real changes in the lives of the people who have offended, as well as how they are dealt with in our justice system. It is a practical approach that reconnects offenders and their families and their communities, while establishing more appropriate accountability relating to the offences.

As I listened to the Ngapuhi group giving their workshop, I could see that their alternative strategy was no soft option. It is very courageous work to turn up as active citizens and meet with families and offenders and victims and keep reminding everyone of the “We”. As Judge Rota pointed out:

*“No Maori is a loner. When they come into the court, when they come to the police station, they have a whanau on their shoulder, whether you can see it or not.” – Judge James Rota*

The current industrial system of jailing fellow New Zealanders at a cost of over \$90,000 per person per year — only to see 70% of them reoffend within two years of their release — is a situation that is obviously calling out for more creativity. The challenge for *Te Mana o Ngapuhi Kowhau Rau*, and for similar groups, is to champion a complete shift in how we think about crime and punishment.

The big money we are currently spending on the prison system is not achieving our goals. We need a justice reinvestment that can explore innovative alternatives — particularly in mental health and addiction services and the sort of family and community outreach programmes that this Ngapuhi group are pioneering.

11.

I’ve only had time to talk about these three examples of the social entrepreneurs in *How Communities Heal*.

The book is full of many more stories of how community activists are getting on with their creativity of “We”.

## How Communities Heal

avoiding the problem	managing or organising the problem	questioning the problem	healing the problem
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I wanted to talk a little about the Fellowship itself, because a key question for me is: *What is this creativity serving?*

The book is called *How Communities Heal* because this refers to an important switch in thinking that is at the heart of social entrepreneurship.

Too many of our social services are just organising problems, rather than solving

or healing them. Social innovation and social entrepreneurship really starts to emerge when we make that switch in thinking ... and take up that deeper creative challenge of social change.

This unfortunately is something that is not yet well understood by those who fund social service activities in our communities. I think it would be fair to say that there is a lot more funding available for projects that are managing problems, than there is for the people and projects that are working to heal them.

But social entrepreneurs are not called to their work simply to commodify problems ... and then earn a living out of them. We are here to permanently alter the perceptions, behaviours and structures that are creating the problems in the first place. We want real impact and real change ... and there is no doubting that this “*creativity for the common good*” will be disruptive to the status quo.

12.

The New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship has had a simple strategy: get people of diversity together, spend several days reflecting on what you are doing, sharing stories, and then watch as the creativity starts to cook !

At the heart of this strategy is a simple tool: *talking with one another*.

But it is not as simple as that ... because we’ve found we have needed a different type of talking with one another, and a different type of conversation.

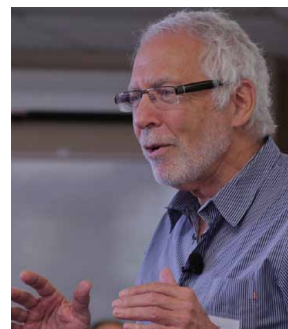
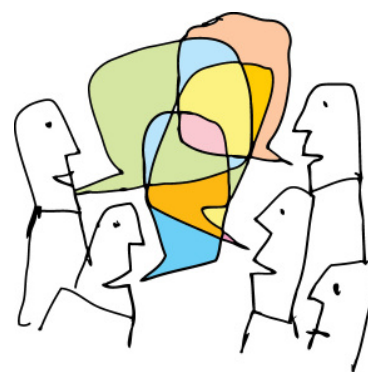
We are living in an 24/7 media society dominated by information technologies ... and yet we suffer a scarcity of a certain type of conversation – the conversation that authentically speaks to the heart of “We”.

There is a *whakatauki* in Maori communities which goes “*Ko te kai o te rangatira, he korero.*” (... conversation is the food of chiefs).

This proverb speaks to me of another important switch in thinking about the creative and leadership potential that is found in the art of conversation itself. For while we are surrounded by the noise of an information culture, our communities are still quite hungry for a deeper conversation: the food of chiefs.

I have been inspired by the work of Peter Block who has brought together some important thinking on community building and civic engagement. In an interview posted on YouTube, he said something which startled me:

*“If we want to change the nature of our communities ... then we need to change the nature of the conversations we are having with one another ...”*  
— Peter Block



The interesting thing to me was that I already knew that. Changing the nature of our conversations was at the heart of what I was already doing with the Fellowship.

But I was startled ... because there was something in the way that he said it, that led me to remember what I had to do next.

13.

In the last part of this presentation, I want to tell you something about my own more recent “*creativity for the common good.*”

After 40 years of working on issues of unemployment and economic development, I’ve wanted to take a deeper look at the heart of “community development”, and the overall state of our community sector.

Where I am starting from is I think that “community development” is stuck. Yes, there are a lot of good people in council and government departments and in private agencies doing very worthwhile projects ... but systemically, it is stuck.

Most of the current profession of “community development” workers and managers are not really engaged on the fundamental issues that concern us most in our communities, and are not even measuring them. More often than not, politicians and departmental managers see “community development” as a form of event management, or a public relations tool for council or government policies.

Alongside this we’ve got a community sector that is also stuck.

This sector is still appallingly known as the “not-for-profit” sector, or NGOs (i.e. defined by what they are *not*) ... rather than given the dignity of its own name. It is a sector almost completely colonised by a contracting culture that (like *Generica* itself) has an unspoken vested interest in never really finding solutions to the problems it is being paid to address.

So when you sense that something is stuck and undiscussable ... then that’s a great opportunity for a social entrepreneur.

And that’s what’s been calling me as an active citizen. Inspired by what I’d been learning from the Fellowship, I’ve been taking the time to ask some deeper questions:

*How would we completely re-think civic engagement and the regeneration of our community sector ?*

*What would be a social enterprise and citizen-led approach to community development ?*



14.

The first thing I did was to start talking.

I invited two friends to breakfast at a local restaurant. These were two leading and long-time workers in community development in New Plymouth and Taranaki. They had different roles in different agencies, and are sometimes competitors for funding.

I said, “Let’s take all our various hats off for a

while ... all the roles and labels that we carry around with us as we do our work. Let's just have breakfast together as active citizens in this province that we love."

Then I issued a deeper invitation: "Let's tell each other the truth of what we are seeing right now ... rather than what we tell our funders." They both knew what I was talking about – because the growing gap between these two messages is in itself a significant problem in the sector right now.

Well, once we started talking, we found we couldn't stop. We ended up having breakfast every fortnight for the next nine months. The conversations deepened our understanding of what we mean by community development and civic engagement. We asked ourselves some challenging questions about what sort of community sector we handing on to the next generation.

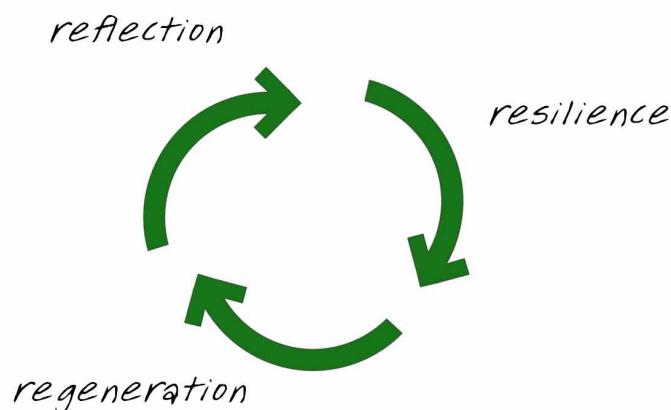
The following year we opened up this conversation to a wider group of people. We wanted to make it as diverse as we could, with more community development workers, people working in disability or and mental health fields, community workers from our poorest neighbourhoods, and people involved in the arts. And we had these meetings at the New Plymouth District Council buildings, because we wanted to be doing this re-thinking work in civic space.



Again, we found that people were very hungry for these conversations. They were hungry for an authentic opportunity to stop and reflect. We spent four months at it, and established the beginnings of a learning community on how we as active citizens can do our work differently, and create real change.

15.

So you'll remember the image of *vicious* circle I've just shown you, a circle that many of us in the community sector have felt that we were trapped in. Well, I do believe there is such a thing as a *virtuous* circle, and it goes in the other direction.



The doorway to the virtuous circle is *reflection* ... and, in our case, that process of reflection was being catalysed by choosing to have a different type of conversation. But along with this, there is a need to get smarter about just what constitutes *resilience* in

our community sector, and to get a lot smarter about strategies for *regeneration*.

This slowly became our agenda for creating a citizen-based approach to “community development”.

16.

In the next year, I worked with Wayne Morris and Lynne Holdem to create what we called a *Masterclass for Active Citizenship*. It has been hugely influenced by Peter Block and his notion that if we want to change the nature of our community, then we need to change the nature of the conversations that are taking place. Peter Block’s book *Community* has also become a key resource in naming and shaping the sorts of conversations that many of us were already having.

The *Masterclass* is a way of focusing the conversations we wanted to have about active citizenship and engaged generosity in our province. We talk about the state of our community organisations and how we can do “community development” better. We talk about how we can do “real” good – especially in these times of cutbacks and austerity measures that are affecting all our groups. And we talk about how we can maintain and renew our commitment to creativity, and the innovation and entrepreneurship that we need right now if we are going to regenerate the community sector.

Last year we held this Masterclass with eighteen people at Puke Ariki, New Plymouth’s museum and library on the waterfront. This year we have started another version of the Masterclass, run in a Maori context, at *Tu Tama Wahine o Taranaki*. And we are soon to start another one, in June, and this will be held in the Bellringer Pavilion in Pukekura Park.

The Masterclasses are four months long, and they are by invitation. Once a fortnight we hold the workshops and conversations where all the initial keynotes are presented by the participants themselves. During the weeks in between these workshops, the participants are then encouraged to make an appointment with someone else in the group and talk about what they are learning.



The workshops and appointments are an important process where the weaving between people can take place. This takes time. In the end this is a process that builds the networks and social capital which become the foundation for the *resilience* and *regeneration* strategies that we are trying to foster.

17.

We have established a new organisation called *Community Taranaki* which can be a vehicle for this initiative. It is simply a vehicle for connecting active citizens around our mountain ... and exploring ways that we can be more effective in meeting our common challenges. It is a vehicle for getting wiser about “We”.



*Community Taranaki* is running with three main activities:

The first is the *Masterclass for Active Citizenship*, which I have already talked about.

I mentioned that participation is by invitation-only, but this is not to make them exclusive or some sort of club. They are invitation-only because the transformative nature of “invitation” is one of the main topics of our conversations in the Masterclass.

One of the ways we make this invitation authentic is in the fact that the Masterclass itself is a gift to its participants. This reflects the fact that “generosity” and the nature of our “gifts” are also key topics for conversation.

While there is a lot of voluntary contributions to the hosting of the Masterclass, it also costs us to organise these events.

And we fund this by the generosity of “pay-it-forward” contributions from previous participants. We also have sponsorships from the community organisations, trusts, and local businesses who feel they are benefitting from our Masterclasses and want to support this developmental work.

The second activity is our *Social Innovation and Community Action Incubator*. This has been created for people who are starting up new community projects, or looking to regenerate existing ones.

I used to teach the *Skills of Enterprise* courses for small business that were run here in New Plymouth twenty years ago. More recently, I have realised that we needed another such learning place, but this one looking more at the skills for *social enterprise*.

Again, it has been designed as a four-month course of workshops, with the support of one-to-one consultation sessions where we can go into the particular details of a participant’s project. There are also weekly appointments held between the members of the group.

In effect, the *Incubator* establishes a peer support group for new community initiatives. It enables us to do our work *for* community, *in* community ... rather than all of us being stuck in our own separate home offices, trying to make a difference.



The third activity is running *Community Circles*. These are gatherings of active citizens drawn from all different sectors and activities and passions.

I began this activity once I remembered that the oldest form of “community development” is *calling a circle*.

And it is surprising to realise that we just haven’t been doing this.

These days, we don’t talk together as communities unless it’s a crisis ... and by then opinions are already polarised, and that’s not the best context for a real creative conversation.

So we have started calling *Community Circles*, and we are doing it once every three months. We’ve started quite small in this activity, and we’re just letting it organically grow by word-of-mouth.



Again, it’s a simple recipe: We ask a few people to start the ball rolling with a short keynote on what they are seeing in our community right now, what they are concerned about, and what opportunities do they see.

Then we break into small groups and get into the conversations. We finish off with a full circle sharing of the nuggets and insights that have come to the surface during these small groups.

Recently we have just started to work in partnership on this initiative with the Community Development team at the New Plymouth District Council. We are now holding the *Community Circles* in the New Plymouth Council Chambers, which — once you re-arrange the furniture — reveals itself to be a beautiful circular meeting space.

And it feels just right to be having a very different type of conversation ... right there in the heart of an important civic space.

18.

Like most creatives, we don’t know where all this is going ... and we are making it up as we go along.

But there are already stories emerging of real changes taking place in individuals and in community groups as they start to engage in this citizen-led developmental



process. They are telling us how their groups are being transformed, and how they are getting more engagement in their activities.

If only 5% of the people in Taranaki are already active citizens and are the creative changemakers of our province, then that actually amounts to 5,000 people. That's a lot of people. But it seems that we are all working on our own issues, working separately in our own silos, without a sense of common cause.

What would it look like if these 5,000 people were more robustly connected, if we were in conversation with one another, and if we were sharing skills and resources?

Actually, I think that if this was to happen, then all our work in our communities – our “*creativity for the common good*” – would be fundamentally changed. That's part of the vision that is shaping our purpose with *Community Taranaki*.

It may take us a generation to get there ... but it feels like a job well worth doing.

19.

Our capacity for community is hard-wired. Perhaps it's even a part of our DNA.

Biologists tell us that *Life* exists to create the conditions that are conducive for life. *Life* is its own virtuous circle.

And I think it is the same with human beings and communities ... communities are our most natural structure for belonging. Healthy communities are their own virtuous circles. They are how we as human beings do our version of *Life*.

Business is an important part of communities — it is quite critical in terms of livelihood and plainly getting so much done. But there really is no “business case” for communities themselves any more than there is a business case for making love or growing our families.

The in-built wisdom of why and how we can create and sustain our communities is deeply woven into our beings. It is a wisdom that is tens of thousands of years old. Perhaps it is our original language.

It was at the evaluation of our last *Masterclass* that one of the participants stood up and remarked that his experience of the workshops was like *regaining* a language that he already knew ... but hadn't been using.

And then he said: “... Languages get lost if you don't use them.”

I'd been reading recently about the work of Wade Davis, the *National Geographic* explorer and anthropologist and ethnobotanist who has been looking at the loss of indigenous languages around the world.

He tells us that there are 7,000 languages in the world right now, but over 50% of them are no longer being taught to children.



Wade Davis quite rightly points out that the loss of a language is a huge loss to the collective wisdom of humanity. He describes the loss of each language as like “... *losing an old growth forest of the mind*”.

I think it is the same in terms of the encroachment of *Generic*, and the loss of our language of community ... and the wisdom and capabilities of “We”.

We might well think that the “We” feels broken. But it is not at all lost.

It is inside of us. There is indeed an old growth forest in our own hearts ... except that it *does* need our active tongues, our working hands, and our vivid imaginations.

It *does* need our active citizenship and our engaged generosity.

It *does* need all the courage, curiosity and commitment we can muster to connect with one another ... and have the sorts of conversations we are not used to.

When we do that ... *together* ... we can heal, restore, and create anew the communities that *all of us* would be proud to live in.

*vivian Hutchinson*

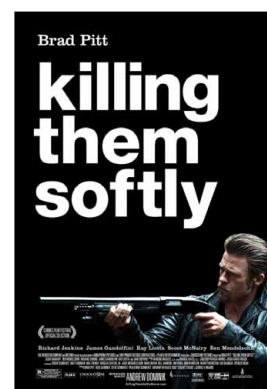
vivian Hutchinson  
Taranaki April 2013

# Notes and Links

- This paper is based on a keynote speech given to the New Zealand Creativity Challenge held in New Plymouth, Taranaki, New Zealand on 27-28 April 2013.
- this paper can also be downloaded in PDF format from [tinyurl.com/vivianWe13](http://tinyurl.com/vivianWe13)



- vivian Hutchinson QSM is a community activist and social entrepreneur who has worked mainly on issues of race relations, social justice, job creation and philanthropy. In 2006 he was awarded the Queen's Service Medal for Community Services (QSM) in the New Zealand New Years Honours, in recognition of this work. He is the author of the book *How Communities Heal – stories of social innovation and social change* (2012). His latest projects are about how to foster more active citizenship and generous engagement on our most important community issues. Website is at [www.vivianhutchinson.org.nz](http://www.vivianhutchinson.org.nz)
- *special thanks* to Wayne Morris and the organising team for the Creative Challenge 2013 – Ruth Harvey, Shona Glentworth, Joelle Xavier and Ian Clothier.
- The *New Zealand Creativity Challenge* conference website is at [www.nzcreativity.co.nz](http://www.nzcreativity.co.nz)
- thanks also to the *Community Taranaki* and *Masterclass* organisers – Elaine Gill, Wayne Morris, Lynne Holdem, Jocelyn Millard, Sarah Birchler and Paul Smith, and also to Ngaropi Cameron and Awhina Cameron of *Tu Tama Wahine o Taranaki*.
- *Community Taranaki* website is at [www.taranaki.gen.nz](http://www.taranaki.gen.nz)
- *photo of vivian Hutchinson* speaking at the *Creativity Challenge* was taken by Anand Rose.
- *Peter Block* ... is the author of *Community – The Structure of Belonging* (2008) available at [www.amazon.com/dp/1605092770](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1605092770), and is also co-author (with John McKnight) of *The Abundant Community – Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods* (2012) at [www.amazon.com/dp/1609940814](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1609940814). For more information on Block and McKnight's work see [www.abundantcommunity.com](http://www.abundantcommunity.com)
- *Brad Pitt film ... Killing Them Softly* (2012) Screenplay by Andrew Dominik and George V. Higgins, and directed by Andrew Dominik. More at [www.imdb.com/title/tt1764234](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1764234)
- *call it Generica* ... it's there in the Urban Dictionary [www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)
- *James K. Baxter* ... these lines are from his *Ode to Auckland*, written three days before his death in October 1972. See *Ode To Auckland and other poems* by James K. Baxter (Caveman Press, Dunedin Feb 1973)
- *State of the Nation reports* ... from The Salvation Army Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit . For more information and downloading the reports see [tinyurl.com/nzsason](http://tinyurl.com/nzsason)
- *Sir Ken Robinson* ... author, educator and creativity expert. For more see [www.ted.com/speakers/sir\\_ken\\_robinson.html](http://www.ted.com/speakers/sir_ken_robinson.html)
- *New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship* ... was founded in 2006 with funding from the Tindall Foundation and support from several other philanthropic trusts and community leaders. This learning community is now self-organised by the social entrepreneurs themselves. For more information see [www.nzsef.org.nz](http://www.nzsef.org.nz)



- *How Communities Heal* ... stories of social innovation and social change featuring members of the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship (2012). See [www.nzsef.org.nz/howcommunitiesheal](http://www.nzsef.org.nz/howcommunitiesheal)
- *Brian Donnelly* ... can be contacted at [bd.nzhf@xtra.co.nz](mailto:bd.nzhf@xtra.co.nz), or at the Housing Foundation, PO Box 44018, Point Chevalier, Auckland 1246, New Zealand. The New Zealand Housing Foundation is at [www.housingfoundation.co.nz](http://www.housingfoundation.co.nz). See also “*Making housing affordable*” by Virginia Winder and vivian Hutchinson in the *Taranaki Daily News* 27 March 2012.
- *Stephanie McIntyre* ... can be contacted at [director@dcm.org.nz](mailto:director@dcm.org.nz) or at Downtown Community Ministry, Compassion House, Lukes Lane, PO Box 6133, Marion Square, Wellington. The Downtown Community Ministry website is at [www.dcm.org.nz](http://www.dcm.org.nz). See also “*Addressing homelessness*” by Virginia Winder and vivian Hutchinson in the *Taranaki Daily News* 4 December 2012.
- *Ngahau and Debbie Davis* ... can be contacted at [deb@heiw.co.nz](mailto:deb@heiw.co.nz) or at He Iwi Kotahi Tatou Trust, P.O.Box 154, Moerewa 0244. He Iwi Kotahi Tatou Trust website is at [heiw.co.nz](http://heiw.co.nz)
- *E.F. Schumacher (1911-1977)* ... British economist and author of “*Small is Beautiful – a study of economics as if people mattered*” (1973) see [www.amazon.com/dp/0881791695](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0881791695) and “*Good Work*” (1980) [www.amazon.com/dp/0060905611](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0060905611)
- *Te Mana o Ngapuhi Kowhao Rau* ... for more information contact Ngahau Davis, Main Road, Moerewa SH1 [ngahau@heiw.co.nz](mailto:ngahau@heiw.co.nz)
- *justice reinvestment* ... see also the work of social entrepreneur Kim Workman as profiled in *How Communities Heal*, and his project Rethinking Crime and Punishment at [www.rethinking.org.nz](http://www.rethinking.org.nz)
- *Community Taranaki* logo graphics by Sunset.
- *whakatauki (proverb)* ... “*Ko te kai o te rangatira, he korero. Heoi ano, he aha te tohu o te rangatira, he mahi.*”
- *not the best context for a real conversation* ... see more resources on the difference between *debate* and *dialogue* see [www.vivianhutchinson.org.nz/socialinnovationdialogue](http://www.vivianhutchinson.org.nz/socialinnovationdialogue)
- *life creates the conditions that are conducive for life* ... these are the words of biologist Janine Benyus, as quoted by Paul Hawken in his Portland Commencement Address to the Class of 2009, University of Portland 3rd May 2009, available at [tinyurl.com/phawken09](http://tinyurl.com/phawken09)
- *Wade Davis* ... *National Geographic* explorer, anthropologist and ethnobotanist. [www.daviswade.com](http://www.daviswade.com)  
 “Indigenous cultures are not failed attempts at modernity, let alone failed attempts to be us. They are unique expressions of the human imagination and heart, unique answers to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be human and alive? When asked this question, the peoples of the world respond in 7,000 different voices, and these collectively comprise our human repertoire for dealing with all the challenges that will confront us as a species over the coming centuries.” — Wade Davis
- *other speeches and papers by vivian Hutchinson* relating to his work with social entrepreneurship and social innovation, are available on the internet at [www.vivianhutchinson.org.nz](http://www.vivianhutchinson.org.nz)
- This paper is licensed for distribution under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 New Zealand License [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nz/deed.en](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nz/deed.en)

