

## The Market as Community

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The North Union Farmers Market is strengthening community in Northeast Ohio. From the very first market day in July of 1995, people have arrived at the Market to shop and are happily surprised to encounter lost friends. Even today, after eight years, shopping at the Market is often interrupted by the exclamations and gleeful hugs of reunited friends.

But the connections that are being remade at the market are much broader than the simple chance meeting of old friends. The Market helps re-connects us with place. It is one of the few outdoor, participatory activities available from early spring to early winter. And perhaps the only activity that depends upon the season for its content. Because all of the sellers at the Market must grow or produce what they sell, the Market offers an authentic connection to the land and climate of this place. The joy of spring greens, asparagus and ramps, the beauty of juicy red tomatoes and bright peppers in summer, the fragrance of ripe peaches and concord grapes in fall, the comfort of winter wreaths and hot cider. These experiences make awareness of season and climate a celebration rather than an inconvenience to be mitigated by climate control and inside walkways. Walking through the Market in the high heat of July to buy fresh sweet corn for the evening meal brings a new appreciation of the “inconvenience” of weather.

In his recent book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam investigates and chronicles the rapid decline of social capital in America over the last forty years. The statistics are startling and disturbing, especially in light of the benefits of high social capital he documents: safe and productive neighborhoods, prosperity, and superior health and well being of communities. Simply put, social capital is connectedness. Communities that have high social capital have more good will, fellowship, sympathy, reciprocity, trustworthiness, and social networks than those that don't. The Market is an activity that encourages and increases these attributes. Except for an occasional dispute over the last bag of peaches, the Market is a place of civility and comradeship.

Putnam makes a distinction between bonding networks and bridging networks. The former bring people together around common values or concerns and tend to be exclusive. Bonding networks can encourage a deeper reciprocity and solidarity around these values. Bridging networks, on the other hand, tend to form shallower relationships among people who might otherwise have little in common. Bridging networks broaden our identity; increase our knowledge and tolerance of others. The Market builds both kinds of networks.

Obviously, people who care about nutritious food, farmland preservation, and cleaner environments, find like-minded people at the Market among customers and farmers. Last year, when the State of Ohio was considering a bill to restrict what could be sold at farmers markets in the State, over 400 people eagerly signed letters to the House Committee Chairman in support of farmers markets and a broad array of farm products sold there. Like the old fashioned community-based organizations that Putnam shows have lost members in the past thirty years, the market invites participation as a member and volunteer as well as weekly shopper.

At the same time, the Market builds networks of people who have little in common or who would otherwise not interact. After all, eating is a fundamental and universal act. Animated conversations around food between customers of difference racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds are common at the Market. Cooking demonstrations give everyone an equal chance to try and judge a seasonal product. It's easy to admire a stranger's armful of sunflowers or bouquet of lilacs.

One of the many factors Putnam looks at in *Bowling Alone* to measure social capital is frequency with which people eat together both as families and with friends. His conclusions are astonishing. . . "the practice of entertaining friends has not simply moved outside the home, but seems to be vanishing entirely. Informal outings, like picnics, also seem on the path to extinction. . . The fraction of married Americans who say 'definitely' that 'our whole family usually eats dinner together' has declined by a third over the last twenty years. . ."

There are no hard data to support the assertion that the Market encourages families and friends to eat together. But anecdotal evidence indicates that people do love to share the bounty. There is no elaborate planning for a picnic or dinner party with farm-fresh products: simply go to the Market, buy what's available that week and a wonderful, tasty meal is easy to prepare.

Many farm families live very different lives than those in the city. Contact with them, especially the Amish who eschew much of modern life, may make city dwellers pause and be thankful for what they have, or maybe even wonder about the merits of modern city life. One farmer told me the story of bringing his daughters to Shaker Square for the first time and explaining to them what a parking meter is. Face-to-face contact between farmers and consumers put the issues of farmland preservation in a new light. In the end, this may be the most important connection that is made at the market. To be able to prepare a meal and know the farmers who actually grew the food is an extraordinary privilege in today's fast food world dominated by international agribusiness.

If communities with high social capital are better off than those without, then Northeast Ohio is fortunate to have the North Union Farmers Market. What appears on the surface to be a simple weekly gathering of local farmers and consumers is a strong mechanism for creating bonding and bridging networks. Perhaps one proof of the strength of the community felt there was the reaction of people last September 15<sup>th</sup> who came to the Market, not simply to shop, but to be together at a time of national tragedy. Over time, the connections between long lost friends, among strangers who love food, between citizens of Northeast Ohio and the place they inhabit, these connections are deepening and strengthening as people make a weekly visit to the Market a part of their lives.