



Deaconess
Foundation

DEACONESS FOUNDATION REPORT

Practicing Community, Cultivating Democracy

Lessons from Professional Power Shifters

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Richmond, Virginia

4.11.2025

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Deaconess Foundation 2025

Illustration: Sanna Mander

Layout: Noon Kollektiivi / Inari Savola

ISBN: 978-952-9854-85-1

In co-operation:



**Bonner Center for
Civic Engagement**

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Foreword

The Deaconess Foundation (DF) was born out of the commitment and resources of a powerful, wealthy and socially aware woman, Aurora Karamzin (1808–1902), who lived and worked in Helsinki, Finland. As an aristocrat, she had the means to get to know the world. During her travels to Germany and elsewhere in Europe in mid-nineteenth century, she encountered and studied the concept of deaconess institutes, in which young women were trained to become nurses working with the most vulnerable people. Impressed with the dual goals of providing medical training for women and focusing on the most disadvantaged people, she imported the concept to Finland, using her determination and financial means to found Finland's first deaconess institute in Helsinki in 1867. The first deaconess was sworn in to office there in 1873.

The foundation has since grown and expanded its focus. It advocates for human dignity while providing innovative solutions to society's challenges. It currently provides care, social services, housing and counselling to vulnerable groups in nearly 20 Finnish cities, and with its 3500 employees it is now the fourth largest private social enterprise in the country. Like other Finnish foundations, it separated its business and non-profit operations a decade ago due to changes in the laws regulating foundations.

Civic engagement and DF

In 2011, DF's leadership had decided to set up a civic action and community program. The work started with one person and relatively quickly expanded to a team in order to cover more of what was thought to be necessary ground for exploration: how to interest citizens in volunteering or civic action among and with vulnerable people? How to create and support experiences of *agency* among the most vulnerable people and groups in society?

For a number of reasons, while the first question perhaps seemed more obvious for a diaconia organization, over the years the second question became more imminent and crucial to us. DF leadership and the civic action and community program team were equally motivated to build an understanding of how people's agency and sense of worthiness, human dignity, could be upheld or restored – regardless of a person's status and their lived experience.

The civic action and community program team thus built its overall philosophy and projects combining civic engagement, creativity and community building skills. It was this diverse arena of inclusive civic engagement and community building to which we were excited to welcome the exceptionally well-read, curious and creative American colleague, Dr Sylvia Gale, after she first contacted us in the summer of 2021.

Sylvia's first letter spoke to our hearts. It and all her work we later learned more about during her five-month stay was built around the same questions that we – by then a 30-person civic action and community building team – had been asking ourselves and working on together for ten years. We felt and had experienced – and still do, although this period in *homo sapiens'* time on Earth seems to challenge all beliefs – that as communities grow and learn new skills together, and reflect both on what they do together and how they do it, they and their individual members will become more open, capable and resilient. Unhelpful hierarchies within can be dismantled safely without confusing people's specific roles and responsibilities, and without diminishing anyone's worth.

“How, then, to build communities?”



The CABLE pedagogy

Before launching its own civic action and community program in Helsinki in 2011, DF was already involved in shaping and exploring a community practice merging liberation theology, Freirean emancipatory pedagogy and a combination of practices applied in community or social work in Europe, most notably Great Britain and the Netherlands. This approach to adult pedagogy, focusing on enhancing people’s agency, had been developed in a network of European diaconia practitioners including the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (DIAK) in Helsinki. It became known as *Community Action Based Learning for Empowerment*, CABLE. Its goal was to bring about change in the ways people see themselves and how they are seen, in some ways challenging the traditional concept of ‘helping’ that has been the foundation of diaconia. DF staff started to practice and adapt the CABLE pedagogy in different contexts such as Namibia, Africa, and Kontula, eastern Helsinki.

The four D-stations, established 2008–2021 and described in this publication, were built on CABLE pedagogy and are central to its continuous practice and development over the years. For the past 10 years, DF has also shared CABLE practices with any groups, organizations or communities interested in strengthening their community building skills. All in all, over 10 000 people have been immersed in CABLE over the years.

The CABLE process consists of five stages:

IN: Who am I? What am I good at?

OUT: What community/-ies am I part of?

EXPOSURE: What are the barriers to and opportunities for our well-being?

ACTION: What can we do to overcome the barriers in our everyday life?

CHANGE: Action. Positive change. Empowerment.

CABLE is not a method. Rather, it is a pedagogy and approach with a set of applicable steps leading to action points emerging from the collective minds of the participants. It is based on dialogue between equal participants. The facilitator is there as a guide, not a leader. As a group process, CABLE looks for and focuses on what unites people – such as their values – rather than what their individual needs, diagnoses or shortcomings are. It relies on the skills and knowledge of each participant and helps them identify the things

they can have an impact on and what they might want do about it, together. The spotlight is on everyone's capabilities.

The art and practices of living together

Communities and indeed societies have the potential to become more capable of tackling polarization and other challenges, and more adept at both strengthening social cohesion and building services that more accurately answer people's real needs. As human beings, we must be able to apply consistent and effective ways of creating connection; and communicating our feelings, intent, interest and sharing something of our joint fate as *homo sapiens*.

This is where the five subtle practices observed, discerned and now described by Sylvia Gale in this publication come into play. They help focus on what is relevant for a consistent daily practice of conviviality – or the art of living together – that supports the purposes of true inclusion and community building more broadly than just as policies or ways of working within our own organizations in civic engagement roles.

These practices are about how we can choose to interact with each other, no matter what our roles are. They are practices of democracy. We are delighted and proud to share them with you – and interested in connecting with likeminded people and organizations.

Helsinki, October 2025

Laura Hakoköngäs and Saija Karjala
Deaconess Foundation

Author's Note

From January to June 2023, I was immersed in the practices for community-building and civic action cultivated by the Civic Action and Community Programs team within the Helsinki Deaconess Foundation, thanks to a Mid-Career Professional Development Award from the Fulbright Finland Foundation and the generosity of the then 30+ person team in welcoming me as a participant-observer and peer. I spent my time mostly within the three D-stations DF operates in Helsinki, accepting all invitations and showing up whenever I would not be in the way as an English language speaker.

D-stations, or D-asemat, are community centers that function as neighborhood meeting spaces, where activities are organized by residents themselves with support of DF staff, who also identify and address community needs as relevant to and in collaboration with residents. I also broadened my listening, learning, and observing to other community programs stewarded by the Civic Action and Community Programs team as much as possible.

But how did I get there?

In the summer of 2021, I was antsy. As the executive director of a well-established center for civic engagement at a small but very well-resourced university in the southeastern US, I was committed, alongside my colleagues in the center, to linking students, faculty, community organizations and community members in connections rooted in egalitarianism, trust, and respect. Reflecting the larger trends in our field of civic engagement in higher education, we intended to blur the lines between “served” and “serving,” volunteer and subject, recognizing that charity and uplift have failed to render a better world for all people. Rather than being and doing for and *serv*ing others, our aim was (and still is) for participants in the activities and relationships supported by our center to understand themselves as being and doing *with* one another, to understand their responsibilities to a collective good. And we knew that that willingness to act for the collective good depended often on tending to power dynamics between university and community participants.

“How might the staff who lead civic engagement activities systematically and creatively cultivate the conditions in which volunteers are oriented towards collective belonging?”

Our compass direction was clear. Yet, in my second decade of stewarding the center's collaborative work I knew how hard it actually is to establish spaces in which participants from across lines of social difference can experience that collective sense of belonging. Often, the institutions we helped to connect reinforced the hierarchies we were striving to disrupt. For example, in one program, a university-jail partnership, small groups of students and incarcerated young people reflected on their lives over several weeks, with the goal of building healthy, short-term, peer-to-peer relationships as we explored differences, discovered what we have in common, and built a broader understanding of our world, including the conditions that brought us to very different junctures. While the program strove to establish a space for equal exchange, the jail insisted on seeing the University students as “mentors” who would instruct and guide the youth inside. And while university



"I was moved by the Deaconess Foundation's clear emphasis on trust, equality, and respect between *those serving* and *being served*."

participants rejected the idea of being helpers, aspiring instead to be co-learners and co-creators, the University sought opportunities to hold up the students as beneficiaries to the community.

And this is not surprising. Conducting this kind of partnership work in the US brings into sharp relief what Isabel Wilkerson (2020, p. 17) has called the US's caste system, "a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups," a "subconscious code of instructions for maintaining...a four-hundred-year-old social order". This code is more conscious than unconscious in Richmond, Virginia, where our center is located, and which served as the capital of the Confederacy during the US civil war. Here, inequalities intersect as predictably as lines on graph paper.

For example, recent maps of Richmond's "urban heat islands" have identified up to a 16-degree difference between city neighborhoods on the hottest summer days (Popovich and Flavelle 2019). These hottest areas coincide with Richmond's formerly "redlined" neighborhoods, identified by the federal Home Owner's Loan Corporation in the 1930's as too risky to receive home loan investment, in part because of the racial identity and class of their residents. That almost-hundred-year-old caste code continues to have material consequences today. The University of Richmond itself is an historically elite and predominantly white institution, located in what has long been one of the city's whitest and wealthiest neighborhoods.

As we emerged from the long COVID lockdown of 2020-21, during which required isolation forced a reinvention of civic participation on campus and across our city, I sensed an opportunity to shift our practice more radically, to realign ourselves around our core values. But how?

Much has been written about the impacts of service learning and volunteerism on the young people who participate, from academic outcomes and performance, to development of values and the cultivation of positive emotions like compassion and empathy, to leadership and teamwork skills, to career plans for public service (see, for example, Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee, 2000). But there has been much less exploration of how the staff who lead civic engagement initiatives might systematically and creatively cultivate the conditions in which students and other volunteers are oriented towards collective belonging and solidarity, above service. For me and my colleagues, responsible for connecting young people with opportunities for civic participation at a time of multiplying global crises, this is an urgent question.

I knew about the Fulbright program, which supports organizations and universities in hosting visitors for learning exchange around the world, and I had spent a year in Sweden as a teenager. I began to wonder. What might I learn about preparing and engaging volunteers as *peers* in volunteering and social service work in cultures less "caste heavy" than my own?

So I began to search. And quickly, a combination of luck, intuition, hours of internet research, and most importantly of all, the good graces and generosity of people I cold-contacted, led me to Finland, and to the Deaconess Foundation, specifically. In early August 2021, I sent an enthusiastic (and long!) email to Tarja Jalli, who was then producing community programs for the DF. I had learned about DF after following a reference to it in a book chapter published by Professors Aura Nortomaa and Henrietta Grönlund at the University of Helsinki, about a service-learning project conducted with the Foundation in 2017. As I explained in my email message, "I was moved by the Deaconess Foundation's clear emphasis on trust, equality, and respect between those "serving" and "being served."

In learning more about DF online, I had stumbled upon a short essay Tarja wrote in a newsletter and was struck, even through the maze of Google translate, by the emphasis

she placed on egalitarian interactions and on creating a community in which everyone belongs.” As Tarja via Google Translate put it, “volunteering is about dialogue that brings people together with their mutual strengths and needs.” I ended my message to Tarja with this: “I am inspired to reach out to you to introduce myself and to explore possible connections between the work you do in Helsinki, and the work I do in Richmond, VA.”

Remarkably, Tarja wrote back, and instantly connected me to her colleague Laura Hakoköngäs, who, as Tarja put it succinctly in her reply, “started this work at the Deacon Institute 10 years ago.”

Fast forward through many more emails and Zoom calls with Laura and Tarja (always early morning in Richmond, late afternoon in Helsinki), multiple drafts of a project plan, and a marvelous acceptance from the Fulbright Finland Foundation for the award that would enable my travel and residency, and I found myself at last arriving in Helsinki in January 2023.

As it turned out, the work I went to study, and the network of people I learned from and with was even more deeply resonant with my questions than I could have imagined. From a distance, I had been compelled by the extent to which the framework of community empowerment and action seemed to be reflected across the Deaconess Foundation, reshaping the ways social services were delivered, the ways the broader community was engaged and involved, and even the priorities the organization identified for itself. “Civic activity” was clearly a central tenet of the organization’s work; more than a traditional provider of services, the Foundation seemed to be remaking itself as a platform for connecting people. In this context, volunteers were not simply helping to deliver services to people in need; they were participants in a community held in common, a community of peers, each with their own kinds of wealth, expertise, ideas, and resources.

“The line between participant, volunteer and staff member was intentionally blurred.”

Up close, immersing myself among the professional staff, volunteers, community participants, and the orbit of other thinkers and do-ers my hosts at DF put me in relationship with, the landscape for this work appeared, of course, more complicated. The ethos of egalitarianism and trust that had appeared so universally accepted and culturally apt was, it turned out, in many ways also still countercultural when practiced in the context of community programs. It was that *practice* that began to draw my attention.

As I spent time in the D-stations, observing and interacting with staff, volunteers, and participants, and as I talked with Laura, Tarja, and numerous other staff connected to DF’s Civic Action and Community Programs team, the staff’s consistent commitment to a shared vision in which all people were *working together* towards community goals and the skill they applied to execute that vision even or especially when it went against the larger cultural grain was striking.

Especially at the D-stations, the line between participant, volunteer, and staff member was intentionally blurred. A participant might show up one week in an open café for the coffee and snacks and find themselves the next week responsible for setting the tables. A visitor’s light conversation with a staff member or volunteer about what the neighborhood needs could quickly lead to an invitation for action, converting a visitor/observer into a volunteer working with others to lead a program. (This is in fact what happened to me, and it is how I came to co-lead a Finnish class for short-term visitors to Helsinki during my immersion with DF). In other words, what had seemed from afar to be the natural expression of a cultural value, egalitarianism, was in fact a tactical set of moves intended to repeatedly dislodge the center of power from its assumed position (the professional(s) in the room) to the collective.

I was reminded numerous times while in Finland how easy it is for Americans to succumb to Nordic romanticism. And there is indeed much to admire. Yet, what was most striking and useful about my learning exchange in Finland were the similarities between the constraints my Finnish colleagues and my colleagues in the US operated in as professionals seeking to cultivate civic action, despite our different cultural contexts. It is easy for my colleagues' work in Finland to be seen as another "service," just as it is easy for my team's work within the university to be seen as a rewarding experience for students, first and foremost.

But we know that civic engagement and civic action are not transactional. And the frameworks that would make them so deny and undermine the radical possibilities of the work we are collectively pursuing, because that work, to be successful, requires significant power shifting and sharing.

In my most local context, the power that needs to shift is in part tied up in the hierarchies embedded in higher education in the US. At the most basic level, I am referring to the hierarchy that keeps faculty, staff, students and community members all in separate spheres of learning and knowledge making. Too often, different roles are confused with different value. Students are the intersection, the water (or maybe more accurately, currency) that flows from one sphere to another, but they rarely are seen as having real decision-making power by the institution itself, unless or until they assert that authority, usually via activism.

One consequence of this status quo power structure is that the university is, by and large, a place of in-action. Or, as Carlton Turner, executive director of the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production put it more bluntly in an interview with Erica Kohl-Arenas, "Those institutions that are rich in resources, that are rich in physical and intellectual resources, rich in opportunities. They should be the places in which transformations of our society are emanating from. And they're not. They are the places where dreams and ideas go to die."

This specific institutional hierarchy which contributes to the stagnation of transformative dreams and ideas is, of course, intertwined with the deeply racialized power structure that pervades in Richmond, Virginia, more broadly. Cross-sector leadership roles, job stability, funding and other resources, by and large (with the exception of municipal government) are controlled by white people. This status quo is so deeply ingrained in the literal landscape that it is almost impossible (for white people, especially) to see and name.

In Finland, it seems to me that the power shifts my colleagues' work pushes towards have to do with disrupting the norms around service, around who gives and who receives, who needs and who has. One volunteer I met in a D-Station, who had earlier in life a very rough bout with hard drugs and their aftereffects, told me that 90% of the time, when they needed something, it was provided by the state. Without this, they were very aware, they would most likely have died. There is a sophisticated system for this giving, and it depends in part on extensive categorization of the needy and marginalized who are receiving what is given. A power shift in which an "in it together" attitude unites givers and receivers for collective problem solving and imaginative world building seems necessary if Finland's deeply held values of equality, trust, and human dignity are to flourish despite the ever-changing social conditions (which now include rising anti-immigrant sentiment and a severely under-capacity workforce in the social and healthcare services sector).

The reason I have been so captivated by the work I have observed and participated in inside the D-stations is that there are specific practices in circulation there that instantiate this power shift on multiple levels. The original project title I proposed to the Fulbright Finland Foundation was "From 'volunteer' to 'peer': Learning from a Finnish model for community empowerment." After less than a month of immersion in the Civic Action and Community Programs team, and especially in the D-stations, it became clear to me that what I was studying was, specifically, how the professional staff were creating and holding

space for civic action among volunteers and participants. I came to think of their actions as the “practice of community,” and I began to document the specific, repeated practices I saw in play across the D-stations and by multiple staff.

This report is the result, and it is my hope that it can provoke professionals to think about the power-shifting role we can and do play across sectors in order to cultivate participatory, inclusive, civically active communities.

Our times demand it.

Richmond, Virginia, October 2025



Sylvia Gale
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Introduction

“Mere contact or proximity does not lead to a flourishing democracy, mutual understanding, and acceptance...[F]ostering convivencia requires intentional action and professional capabilities.”

~**Tommi Laitio**, *Convivencia: Turning Friction into Joyful Coexistence* (2024)

“Small is good, small is all. (The large is a reflection of the small.)”

~**Adrienne Maree Brown**, *Emergent Strategy* (2017)

* * *

Below I describe five intentional practices people working in human-facing professions can employ in order to create the conditions for a healthy democracy.

These practices were originally distilled from my observations at the Deaconess Foundation’s Helsinki D-Stations and from my interactions and discussions with professionals across the Foundation’s Civic Action and Community Programs team from January–June 2023, when I was hosted by the Deaconess Foundation on a Mid-Career Professional Development Award from the Fulbright Finland Foundation. Since then, I have augmented and clarified these practices through observation and reflection with colleagues in my American context, where I am the executive director of a well-established center for civic engagement at a small liberal arts university in Richmond, Virginia, in the southeastern United States.

This report aims to raise and address the following questions:

How can we, as professionals, participate in and cultivate democratic, inclusive forms of community building and civic action...

... *in our own daily and programmatic practices?*

... *structurally, within our organizations?*

... *organizationally, influencing other structures?*

And, just as critically:

How are we, as professionals, ourselves perpetuating status quo power dynamics that often block the realization of those goals? How might we shift power to cultivate new possibilities for civic participation and collective problem-solving?

By focusing on the “practice” of community as a way to address these questions, I am evoking both the *art* and *skill* involved, as well as the necessity for repeat performance, for ongoing trial and error. As the leader of a facilitator training I once attended shared, “If we’re not actively practicing, we’re falling into status quo habits and patterns.”

Practice in this context is not the way to perfection, and it also does not mean *keep going until you collapse*. Instead, the practice of community-building is a perpetual act of foundation-building. It is never done. For this reason, it takes tremendous skill, creativity,

patience, vision, and time. And, it is a practice rendered over and over again in everyday spaces in the smallest and most mundane ways. It is a practice in which we can all participate, from wherever we are and in the roles we hold right now.

In this way, the practice of community I document here is perhaps best understood as a pedagogy, not a project. The specific ways of doing and being that I describe based on my observations of and conversations with staff and volunteers in DF's community centers illustrate what building the foundation for civic action looks like. The goal of these practices extends far beyond hospitality.

Certainly, people must feel welcome in community spaces, which includes being seen, heard, and actively included. But as a framework, hospitality (in Finnish, *vieraanvaraisuus*) suggests a focus on activities as the end game, on what we are doing to ensure people feel welcomed, while the framework of civic action (in Finnish, *kansalaistoiminta*) requires that we maintain our focus on how we are creating and supporting the conditions in which people can enact change.

A civic action framework necessitates that we continually bracket productivity and its cousin efficiency in favor of an emphasis on process and relationships, as these provide "the enduring foundation for culture change" (Knoerr, Castillo, Sánchez, & Zimmermann, 2023, p. 86). The practices help us do this, but they are not themselves the end goals; they are the processes by which a community's goals become possible.

Why "practice community"? Why shift power?

The practices I document here align with the concept of *convivencia* as elaborated by public space researcher and former City of Helsinki director of Culture and Leisure Tommi Laitio (2024), whose quote opens this introduction. Laitio (2024) defines *convivencia* - the Spanish word for what is also called, though with different resonance, *conviviality* - as "the capability to co-exist and to create pragmatic solutions across differences". This is not about everyone just getting along, or even about everyone co-habiting with blasé tolerance (as I learned to do as a child growing up in New York City). Instead, Laitio clarifies that "opportunities for *convivencia* support a sense of belonging...while recognizing the imminent friction from sharing limited assets with others" (emphasis mine). Friction is not a problem. Indeed, a core principle of *convivencia* as outlined by Laitio is that it is an "innovative space between harmony and open conflict". (Laitio 2024.)

When *convivencia* is used as a guideline for public space development, use, and support, it becomes clear that actualizing it requires "new skill sets from public space users and staff" (Laitio 2024). In other words, as I quoted above, merely being in contact or proximate to others, even in a space designed for harmony and co-existence, does not in itself lead to a "flourishing democracy, mutual understanding, and acceptance". Fostering *convivencia*, holding that space between "harmony and open conflict" so that people may, individually and together, discover new capabilities and new ways of belonging, requires intentional, skilled action and artful power tending by the people charged with stewarding public or community spaces, organizations, or groups of many kinds.

This report offers guidance in the project of fostering *convivencia* by articulating a set of practices in use by professional staff and volunteers in the Deaconess Foundation's D-stations. The practices I document in this report are all "small" in that they are actionable within a professional's daily work across many kinds of organizations and roles. They can seem dwarfed by the collective problems we face in our communities. But they are also "large" in the sense that these practices can, when practiced consistently and intentionally, refract the status quo direction of power, just as a puddle or a mirror can break up and redirect the direction of light. This refraction of power is significant because not having

“People must feel welcome in community spaces, which includes being seen, heard, and actively included.”



space in which to exercise our power leads to paralysis, despair, disengagement, etc. The antidote to this is to cultivate spaces in which power is made visible and shared, in multiple ways, with multiple people, over and over.

I opened this report with the core principle offered by community organizer and strategist Adrienne Maree Brown, that “small is all” because this understanding is an anchor for professionals aiming to practice community consistently and despite cultural and/or organizational norms, a way to counter what can feel like the overwhelming weight of *how things are* (Brown 2017, p. 41). Brown describes this relationship between the large and the small as a fractal, an element of her larger approach to organizing and change work, which she calls “emergent strategy.” Fractals, those repeating patterns we see everywhere in nature, suggest that “what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system” (Brown 2017, p. 53).

This understanding is, increasingly, the foundation for my own practice as a civic-minded professional, and I have come to it honestly. I have learned, for example, that how you set the chairs for an event does in fact set the pattern for the event. Who and how opens the meeting sets the direction for the meeting, not only in tone but also in content. What you do on the first day of class establishes how and whether you will think together about whose knowledge matters. How the coffee is made and who has the keys sets the stage for who has the power in a community setting. And I am beginning to understand that, as Brown observes, each of us is ourselves a part of the fractal pattern, and we have a chance to reset the larger pattern every time we show up with intention, acting in alignment with our values, choosing to honor not only the end goal but also *how* the work needs to be done.

I am aware that the emphasis on small things can sometimes feel like a dodge. Certainly, those focused on traditional results and metrics often see it that way. *The world is burning, we need action, not another meeting. We need policy that facilitates environmental justice, not a film club organized by residents.*

One way we can understand the significance of what happens in the D-stations, as encouraged by the practices documented and described here, is that these settings nurture what political philosopher Martha Nussbaum distinguishes as “internal capabilities.” In the Capabilities Approach developed by Nussbaum and others, the key measure of a society’s achievement is the extent to which people in that society have the “substantial freedom to choose and act” in core domains like health, learning, work, etc., (Nussbaum 2011, p. 24). *Internal* capabilities, in this context, are “trained or developed traits and abilities,” and they are “developed, in most cases, in interaction with the social, economic, familial, and political environment” (Nussbaum 2011, p. 21).

In other words, internal capabilities are not the “innate equipment” we are each born with, but the traits we learn, practice, and develop along the way. Whether residents are organizing an art club, a film series, an open cafe, a community cleanup, or a food redistribution system to prevent waste, they are supported, via the practice of community as described here, in the development of traits and abilities that may propel them to exercise their freedom to choose and act.

Here, we need to be careful not to rely on individualized outcomes to understand the impact of the practice of community. As American political theorist and democracy advocate Danielle Allen (“Justice” 2024) reminds us, a key pillar of a healthy participatory democracy is a “connected society,” in which we can experience and understand ourselves as linked in multiple ways. Allen affirms the idea of “bridging ties,” the overlaps and intersections we find with one another across identities and which are encouraged by social structures that facilitate our interaction (Allen cites the example of mixed income and multi-modal neighborhoods, in which people of various backgrounds live, work, learn, and shop together; D-stations, at another scale, are another such structure). Similarly, scholars elaborating the idea of a *democratic civic identity* have argued that, to be enacted fully, that identity must be exercised in multiple arenas, including the ways we think, act, reflect, and collaborate together (Bringle, Clayton, & Kniffin, 2024).

Recently, I have been compelled by the related idea of “civic culture,” defined in a timely report from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences (2024, p. 11) as “the aggregate of decisions every person makes regarding how to behave in the company of others and whether to treat community problems as their own”. Perhaps what the community workers I studied when conducting the research for this report were doing is best understood as *cultivating civic culture*, which involves a commitment to “being and staying in relationship with” one another, and “to the possibility of living together in a freedom that works for all” (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2024, p. 11).

And how do we create culture? By intentionally tending power. Centering human agency. Being human together and trusting one another. Imagining beyond what seems possible.

The point here is not to gloss over the large space between the rituals by which events are organized by participants in a community center and civic participation in a democracy. However, what links the “small” to the “large” is the way in which community is practiced in the center, over and over, together. This is the fractal concept embodied. This is the practice I illustrate in this report and invite us to put into action.

Why focus on “professionals”?

It may seem odd that, in a project so focused on the practice of community, I continue to differentiate the actions of “professionals.” In fact, I’m not at all interested in enforcing the boundary between professionals and others. I *am* invested, though, in understanding the forms of power invested in various professional roles.

Colloquially, we tend to understand professional roles as those for which some specific skill or training is required and in which some formal authority or responsibility has been vested. “By the authority vested in me by the state of (California, Texas, Ohio, etc)” is what marriage officiants in the United States say, for example, to affirm their capacity to bind two people in legal union. In other professional roles, our specific forms of authority may be signaled by dress or by space. Do we wear a uniform? Do we work, by design, in a larger work space than others? In my own workplace, positions of a certain level are supposed to be housed in offices of a corresponding size. More space = more authority.

By this logic, it is easy for many of us in professional roles to feel that when it comes to power, we have little to none, especially in institutions in which formal, broad decision-making authority has been concentrated in fewer positions clustered towards the top of the organizational chart. In such multi-layered hierarchies, it can be difficult even to exercise the responsibilities supposedly already entrusted in our roles, let alone to practice shifting power. (As one colleague shared in the aftermath of an organizational restructure, “Now you need to ask three people if you can say something.”)

These circumstances are frustrating. I have come to understand, however, that the authority associated with our roles, our institutions, our credentials and our experience is *one* type of power. Another type lies in *how* we move within those roles, the level of control we like to have over processes and products, for example, or how comfortable we are relying on our own expertise. When I speak of the necessity of shifting power to cultivate agency and, ultimately, civic culture, I am referring to either or both of those types of power, which we might simplify as the power others invest in us and the power we invest in ourselves.

“We create culture by intentionally tending power.”

The practice of community as described in this report can be exercised from any position or role, as long as the person in it seeks to cultivate participatory and inclusive communities, and is willing to, in D-station staff members’ words, strive to “not cling to” their own power, wherever it resides, to do so. This isn’t, of course, a one-time or simple task, and it is not one likely to be done for us. That is, this isn’t about critiquing organizational structures or waiting for them to change. It is about asking, how do we exercise the responsibility inherent in the roles we hold such that we are actively tending and shifting the power they contain?

The practices described in this report may hold special relevance for people who work with the marginalized and excluded, and people who work in NGOs and other kinds of human service providers. However, this practice is not only for civil servants or those in the helping or “people professions.” My larger purpose in this project is to take what I have distilled from my observations at D-Stations and from my interactions and discussions with professionals across the Deaconess Foundation’s Civic Action and Community Programs team and beyond to provoke professionals in many other contexts to reflect on their own potential to practice community.

A phrase used by some to describe this approach to being a community-oriented professional across sectors is “civic professionals.” In its simplest sense, a civic professional is one who takes seriously “the civic responsibilities that accompany their decisions and actions in the world of work—whether in the for-profit, nonprofit, or government sectors” (A. Koritz, P. Schadewald, H. Hubert 2016, p. 8). Specifically, though, as Nick Longo explains, civic professionalism requires a “shift from acting as outside experts tasked with fixing problems for people to working collaboratively with people in local communities.” As such, civic professionals must “learn to unleash the capacity of ordinary people and indigenous

ways of knowing, and to infuse their work with public-facing, participatory engagement” (Longo 2023, p. 8). In other words, they must actively practice community.

No matter where we work, there are two underlying assertions that are especially critical to being a civic professional. The first is that shifting power is not about “empowerment”; rather, everyone already has power. Traditions of community organizing have a lot to teach us about this. Aixelé Aman Rivera and Ray López-Chang (2023, p. 80) explain that “[n]o one has power to *give* to another human being...our moral responsibility is to *activate* existing power”. As one D-station volunteer put it, “the problem is not that people don’t have power; it’s that they are not being listened to.” For professionals, cultivating spaces in which power is activated and people are listened to can also mean acting in ways that usefully restrain power when it threatens to act as a dominating, disempowering, or silencing force in a group.

The second assertion underlying civic professionalism is that knowledge is co-created and co-creative. This does not only mean acknowledging that everyone has skills and knowledge or recognizing and valuing multiple kinds of expertise (for example, both lived and credentialed, or both felt and learned), though those are important steps. It also means releasing the idea that there is “a correct” knowledge and embracing instead the possibility that knowledge emerges out of dialogue, that it is co-created at the intersections of multiple ways of knowing and doing. What we know individually is amplified, refined, challenged, tested, reworked, and transformed as we activate our collective intelligence and discover what we know, *together*. Danielle Allen (“Seminar” 2024) takes this one step further, arguing that a key point of democracy is bringing collective intelligence to bear on a problem, and that requires the full range of perspectives. As a beginning point, this mindset requires the professional to understand that even my highly regarded and credentialed truth is not *the* truth.

With these two foundational principles in mind, my hope is that the provocations below offer us a useful and tangible way to practically and tactically activate our own civic professionalism, or, more accurately, the professionalism required to hold the space for the civic.

How to use this report

Below, I offer five “practices of community”: the practice of centering human agency, the practice of showing up human, the practice of trust, the practice of inclusion or full participation and the practice of dreaming. In each case, I will describe and define the practice, offer examples of how this practice may manifest in community settings, explore the practice’s deeper significance in a greater context, and then offer questions the practice might raise for professionals across sectors to consider.

More than anything, this project is reflective. The practices are meant as prompts to help us think together about what is promising and what is possible from the perspective of the specific roles we hold. In this vein, one way to interact with the report is to pause when engaging the examples. The examples I offer are drawn from my observation, conversation, and experience; they are not made up. However, they are here primarily to stimulate discussion and imagination.

I invite you to ask these questions of yourself or one another as you read the examples offered for each practice:

In what specific way(s) do these scenarios demonstrate the practice described?

What example(s) from your own experiences would you add to the list?

The Practices

Practice #1: The practice of centering human agency

What is it?

If people are to access their own power, there must be space in which they can practice it. This means that in small ways, as well as large, they must know that their actions and their knowledge, voice, expertise, dreams matter. And they must be invited in to negotiate the friction between their own perspectives and ideas and those of others, together. The practice of consistently inviting and encouraging people to practice their own power is the practice of centering human agency. This includes encouraging people to practice restraining their own power in the interest of the group, as well as encouraging people not to easily give up their power.

For example:

- It's time for a club to start at a D-station and the volunteers and participants are scattered around the room. No food is on the side table yet, and no coffee is brewing. A staff member approaches the volunteer club leaders who are sitting on the couch, and she says: "So, if you want some food, you can probably find it here."
- In a D-station, there is a handwritten sign on the coffeemaker, which is in the large, main room. The sign reads: "Rakasta Toista" or, "Love One Another." Above the coffee pot, a printed sign spells out the message: "Ken kahvia tahtoo, saa sitä tässä keittää" or "Whoever wants coffee, can cook it here."
- A sign goes up on the wall as summer approaches. It says: "Mitä toimintaa toivoisit D-aseamalla? Kerro ideoitasi!" or "What activity would you like to do at the D-station? Share your ideas!" The sign is accompanied by a large, colorful calendar with space for ideas in each month of the year. It stays up for weeks as the boxes fill. In each D-station, there are also regular community meetings held to gather and discuss new ideas. Staff support volunteers in executing the ideas but rarely lead them outright.
- A volunteer is dominating the planning process for a new program that will help to reduce food waste in the neighborhood. A staff member works one on one and in group settings to encourage the volunteer to learn how to invite other people's ideas and share leadership.
- A sign-up sheet is posted above the table where refreshments are served during "open cafe's," times when the D-station is open for anyone to stop by for food and conversation. There is one sheet for set up and another for cleanup, for each upcoming week. If no one signs up, the cafes won't happen.
- A volunteer explains: "Everybody wants to have a purpose. It sounds so simple, but it's not simple. To be seen and respected as you are. Everybody wants to be seen. It's a human desire."
- A volunteer participating in a community garden becomes frustrated because other volunteers are not taking care of the plants "in the right way." A staff member reminds the volunteer that this project is not about the plants; it is about growing a garden together. How, she asks the volunteer, can the group be invited to share what they know about plant care?
- A small team of staff members representing different roles and levels of authority within their organization is charged with the responsibility to plan a community-engaged, values-based and inclusive strategic planning process. At the outset of the planning process, the group identifies the following goal: "to design and implement a community-engaged planning process that will joyfully involve stakeholders in collectively painting a bold vision for the future based on our organization's strong organizational DNA." The group designs its process around the practice of story circles, as a way to learn more from the lived experiences of people with direct experience of their work. The full staff is then invited to learn how to facilitate story circles; Together, they collect over 300 stories from participants, in 3 months.

“This community depends on your actions.”



Why it matters:

While many of the examples named above point to small acts of human agency, such small acts are quite significant as they are symbolic of a larger organizational culture, of the value being placed on participants and on the many ways they can contribute, and of the expectations for professionals.

The message to participants in these examples is clear and consistent: If you want some coffee, some food, if you want something to happen here we invite you to do it. Everything is here to support you in bringing this idea into being. And what’s more–this community depends on your actions. The emphasis of the practice of centering human agency is not on individuals taking action; it is on individuals learning to take action as self-aware members of a group, and with the interests of that group in mind.

The practice of centering human agency, people’s ability to make choices and to take action, is also one of de-centering conventional expectations of those we see “in charge”

while still communicating that we're in this together. This goes against the grain of professionalism, which has trained most of us to expect that a credentialed expert will solve our problems. In this usual, hyper professionalized context, the role of the staff member is to program, to be busy at all times. In fact, being busy always is the very hallmark of professionalism. More than anything, the practice of centering human agency requires that professional staff slow down.

This "slow down" is significant even when volunteers are not involved, as the last example in the list above suggests. Charged with developing a process for planning for their organization's future, a group of representative staff (who intentionally did not all inhabit traditional leadership roles in the organization) decided to prioritize an inclusive process that would reflect the organization's values and invite multiple and diverse perspectives on their work. This led to a professional development opportunity as the group invited the rest of the staff to learn about their chosen methodology, the story circle, and how to facilitate it. In turn, this led to the formation of another group of staff, a "data analysis working group," committed to giving each story collected its due consideration. Eventually, the process led to the bold vision forward which the original group had been charged with developing. The process was slower than anticipated. Along the way, though, the emergent process centered the agency of all involved, putting key decisions about next steps in their hands. This is an example of an organizational process oriented around the practice of centering human agency, one that required power shifting and sharing by those in traditional organizational leadership roles.

To what extent is chronic busyness related to a culture or expectation of doing for others what might be done by or with others? What is possible when we replace busyness with intentional "being with" or "in it togetherness"? How does shifting power expand the space in which others can practice their agency—and the possibilities for what they make? The following provocations are intended to help us approach those questions through the specifics of our own work roles, responsibilities, cultures, and contexts.

- How do you make space, in your work, for participants to decide, lead, create, and act?
- In what ways are you currently doing things for participants that could be done *by* or *with* participants?
- How does the organizational culture or structure in which you work encourage "doing for" rather than "doing by" or "doing with"?

The Practices

Practice #2: The practice of “showing up human”

What is it?

The practice of “showing up human” is to show up as we are, and to invite others to do the same. It relies on the understanding that we are all part of the community, and that we are learning together, and actively practicing being a community, together.

“Showing up human” means more than acknowledging that we all make mistakes, though that is a key stepping-stone. It means releasing the idea that there is one right way to do things and that any one of us knows exactly where a community process can or should lead. Instead, showing up human means embracing the possibilities that emerge when we encounter one another across differences, sharing what we know and who we are without foreclosing what others bring. It requires that we show up imperfect and also brave, ready to locate ourselves honestly in relationship to others, willing to negotiate the at times difficult encounters necessary to developing healthy communities and trusting one another to be able to do so.



“Showing up human means embracing the possibilities that emerge when we encounter one another across differences.”

For example:

- A volunteer is frustrated; he has arrived to prepare for a program, to find that the materials needed are not available. A staff member meets his frustration with honesty, and an invitation: “I am human, and I make mistakes every day. I am sorry that today you are experiencing the impact of my mistake. What can we do, together, to overcome this?”
- A staff member has observed a pattern in a regular club; the same people are always doing the set-up and clean-up. It tends to be a couple of women in the club who always take care of these things. In a conversation with the volunteer club leader, the staff member asks, “How do you think the club is going?” Together, they reflect on the group dynamics, including those around set up/clean up. The club leader comes up with a plan to introduce the question of how the group can share these responsibilities in the next club meeting.
- A staff member explains her role this way: “I am not the leader here. This is a community. I’m here to help people to make this community work. And I have to let things go and not try always to make things perfect and good. If we make mistakes, then there is the opportunity for people to try things.”
- A leading scholar on the future of democracy opens her remarks to a room of undergraduate students by saying, “We need you to bring your lived experiences to bear on the questions before you.”
- A volunteer coordinator at an organization providing services to people experiencing homelessness orients a group of student volunteers from a private college by saying, “today we are going to work in the food pantry. Feel free to help yourselves.”
- The poster for a signature annual event is printed with a large and visible typo that no one on staff notices until the night of the event. At first embarrassed, the staff decides to embrace the mistake, framing the poster and hanging it in their central offices.

Why it matters:

“Showing up human” is a fundamental part of creating spaces where people who hold different values and beliefs can feel free to take risks and make discoveries together. If the goal of the work is to build community, or, more specifically, to cultivate the skills, habits, and attitudes that nurture healthy and resilient communities, then there really is no shortcut that can be taken around the sticky and often uncomfortable work of encountering one another, navigating our differences and the inevitable bumps that come with being part of a group, consistently.

When we hide leader mistakes or let uncomfortable group dynamics sit unspoken and unattended, even if the group is still on the surface functional, then we are also letting status quo power dynamics prevail. In a healthy community, in which all members of a group can thrive and grow, the dynamics around authority (which is often expressed in terms of who “takes charge” of the group) are consciously tended, not assumed or taken for granted.

While professionals have a huge role to play in encouraging and holding the space for this uncomfortable work, as the examples above demonstrate, doing so means resisting our own inclinations to solve, resolve and make perfect. It means being willing to show up less than perfect ourselves, and therefore vulnerable. It means showing up human.

And it also means understanding that we are not the leaders of the community. So often the norms of professionalism teach us to see ourselves as separate from, and, implicitly, “more” – more knowledgeable, more skilled – than those we work with. “Showing up human” is a way of resisting that separation. That’s because my ability to be fully human with you, to ask that you see *me* as human, depends first on my recognition of *your* full humanity. Showing up human is a necessary precursor to understanding that our own interests are intimately, inextricably, tied to others’. As American poet Gwendolyn Brooks famously wrote:

*we are each other’s
harvest:
we are each other’s
business:
we are each other’s
magnitude and bond.*

(Brooks, “Paul Robeson,” 2005)

The practice of showing up human is the practice of inviting one another out of individualism and into collectivism. It is a practice that repeatedly acknowledges and demonstrates our interconnectedness. A D-station volunteer puts it this way: “We are all dependent on each other. This is the DNA of D-stations.”

Provocations:

- How do you “show up human” in your daily work? In what ways do you find this hard to do?
- How do you create a safe space for mistakes, for risk, and even for failure, your own and others?
- How do you encourage others to navigate the sticky dynamics that arise from being part of a group? Are there ways in which you instead try to solve or resolve these issues for them?
- How do the culture/norms of your organization or profession communicate the expectation that your work, as a professional, should be aiming for perfection?

The Practices

Practice #3: The practice of trust

What is it?

Trusting people means trusting them no matter what. This kind of trust doesn't depend on the expectation of a person's success. It depends on seeing the potential in everyone.

The practice of trust affirms in tangible ways that all participants are credible and valuable. You don't have to be extraordinary to earn that trust. You simply have to be willing to be trusted. Trust is something a participant opts into. At the same time, trust is also inevitably, eventually, accompanied by conflict. There must be conflict for us to grow as a community. If we trust one another, we will be willing to go through this.

“The practice of trust is also a practice of letting go – a ceding of both control and perfection.”

For example:

- Volunteers can use the D-stations when staff are not available; there is a system for keeping the key in the nearby R-kiosk, or corner store, and volunteers get a key pass from the D-station to retrieve it.
- Everyone is welcome as a volunteer at the D-station. There are no special qualifications, or professional or social status required.
- There is a low threshold for transitioning from a participant to a volunteer. When a person shares an idea with a staff member, the staff member is likely to say, “OK, so what do you want to do?”
- An organization is hosting a key event with a high-profile speaker. Staff invite two regular participants to welcome the audience and introduce the speaker. Staff ask questions to help the participants identify the approach they want to take, but do not review their script.
- A staff member explains her role: “This thing is actually taking its course without me, let me step back and wait for people to come and tell me OK, this is what we planned.”
- A researcher’s survey on viewpoint diversity asks participants at the outset, “are you willing to communicate your views in a way that communicates your trustworthiness?”
- A participant in a 12-week urban farming program drops out midway. In the final graduation celebration for remaining participants, the leader of the program acknowledges the absence without judgment and makes clear that the door is never closed for a return.

Why it matters:

The consistent, ongoing practice of trust is also, for staff, a practice of letting go, of openness to what emerges, a ceding of both control and perfection.

Professionals who can practice this kind of trust fluently are able to disentangle our own sense of worth from the outcomes of the work. This means understanding that our own success or failure isn't tied up in the group. It means not seeing our own role as to control, stamp, brand or otherwise own the activities or process of the group, center, or organization. Failure is one of many possible outcomes, and not a disaster.

The practice of trusting in community participants and in community processes requires that staff carefully understand and circumscribe their own power. This doesn't mean staff aren't responsible to the group, or don't care about the outcome, or don't have a special role to play. But it does mean that we need to be aware of the ways we exercise our power in relationship to the group's process.

When we center our own or other professionals' ideas or solutions, or hover over ideas as they emerge, or use our role to validate or scrutinize those ideas, or assume we are needed (to speak first, to introduce an idea or person, to solve a problem as soon as it arises, to represent the group or organization in some public way, for example), we

"Trust the People
(If you trust the people,
they become trustworthy)."



are in effect solidifying and re-centering professional control and expertise, no matter our intentions. Such “power moves” can betray distrust in community participants and community processes. They communicate a status quo understanding of whose knowledge really counts and what kind of expertise matters most.

When we trust participants enough to step back and to the side, opening space in which people can dream, take risks, succeed, fail, and learn, together, and when we understand our professional role as to support participants in entering and holding that space, *then* we are creating space for community, for civic action, for abundant civic possibility. As organizer and strategist Adrienne Maree Brown (2017, p. 41) offers, such trust is another key element of change work:

Trust the People (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy).

Provocations:

- How do you signal your trust in others, in the course of your daily work?
- How might you unwittingly be signaling distrust in others, or seeking to retain control of processes, programs, or events, especially where community expertise is involved?
- How do the culture/norms of your organization or profession reinforce the idea that professionals are to be trusted more than community participants? What practical steps might the organization take to signal more trust in community participants?

The Practices

Practice #4

The practice of inclusion or full participation

What is it?

Inclusion is a consistent, insistent, invitation, a set of practices that gently affirm that this activity is really, truly, open to all. The practice of inclusion is a practice of dedicated open-ness, an insistence on creating a place where everyone knows they belong and knows that they matter, no matter what.

Inclusion is more than a one-time gesture or a statement that everyone is welcome. It is an active and ongoing commitment to creating space for meaningful and full participation. It is the practice of leaving absolutely no one behind, of continually checking to see who might be dropping back, and adjusting as needed. At the same time, the practice of inclusion leaves space for individuals to choose whether and how to participate.

For example:

- Everyone who enters the D-station for any reason at any time is warmly welcomed.
- An online cooking program run from a D-station invites participants to cook alongside a volunteer, from their own kitchens and using ingredients they've picked up from the D-station earlier in the day. When the program opens, no ingredients are out on the D-station counters, and nothing is pre-prepared. Instead, the program invites people to find supplies in their kitchens as they are needed.
- A volunteer language club leader keeps paper and pens on the table, pausing the lively conversation to check for comprehension among participants, and writing out phrases and words as needed.
- A volunteer forgets to return the D-station key to the R-kiosk. When the mistake is discovered, a staff member says to the volunteer: "It is wonderful to see that someone else is forgetting something! I forget things all the time."
- The language used to describe activities and people's roles is strengths-based. A program that distributes food that would be thrown away by local grocery stores, for example, is organized by volunteers as a "food waste kiosk," and people who sign up for weekly bags are participants in minimizing food waste. They are helping to solve a problem in their neighborhood.
- Participants raise questions about some elements of the organization's branding campaign. They don't like the way it represents participants. Staff take these concerns up with the organization's communications department.
- D-stations are "diagnose-free zones." People do not have to sign in, qualify to be there, or justify their presence in any way. Participants can share as much or as little as they want to about themselves, and anyone who wants to participate in the activity or program happening when they visit is welcome.
- A volunteer explains: "Everyone is welcome here. Even if you have made mistakes or 'misbehaved,' you are still welcome."
- Staff members engage participants with open-ended questions when they express their political views during a tense election season. The questions seek to *include* rather than *exclude* people from further conversation: "How did you come to know that?"; "I'm curious about the experiences that led you to think about this in this way."; "What evidence do you have for that idea?"; "Are there other ways that could be interpreted?"¹

¹ Questions influenced by Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities' *Guide to Constructive and Inclusive Dialogue* (p. 11).

“Inclusion is the practice of leaving absolutely no one behind.”

- An organization adopts a set of collective practices or “safer space” guidelines to guide participation across its programs and locations. The guidelines are visible to all participants and referred to often by staff and volunteers as a way to start discussion about shared norms and expectations.
- A staff member sums up her mindset this way: “As long as we are not using offensive words, I am not afraid of having the discussion. I may disagree with your ideology, but I am not going to abandon you.”
- At an event celebrating volunteers, a staff member reminds everyone that they can choose their level of participation in the future. Just because they are being celebrated for their volunteerism does not mean they are required to continue or only valued if they keep up that level of activity.

Why it matters:

Practicing inclusion is different from simply *valuing* inclusion. The practice of inclusion is not about who is present or absent, only, or even about who feels welcome. It is about cultivating ongoing awareness about the impact of group norms, processes, and decisions on the participants and potential participants, and about adjusting as needed so that the group remains inviting and accessible. Practicing inclusion focuses us on the ongoing experience of *being* a community that is consistently open to and welcoming of everyone.

Another useful way to think about the practice of inclusion is as the practice of “full participation,” which Columbia University Law Professor Susan Sturm defines as “an affirmative value focused on creating institutions that enable people, whatever their identity, background, or institutional position, to thrive, realize their capabilities, engage meaningfully in institutional life, and contribute to the flourishing of others” (Sturm 2006, 2010). Full participation is an inclusive approach that seeks out and considers diverse perspectives, recognizes participants as whole people, and invites individuals to contribute meaningfully to the group (“Values”).

Practicing inclusion for professionals aiming to cultivate civic action means more than thinking about how the center or organization is inclusive of diverse peoples and perspectives. It also means designing processes that consistently encourage volunteers and participants themselves to think about how, in daily interactions and in program design, they are setting the conditions in which others can engage meaningfully.

For example, at one D-station, when a volunteer proposes an idea for a new program or activity, the staff will meet with that person to think through the details together. What time will the door open, how will things in the room be arranged? What will happen if people arrive early or late? If it is an activity, the volunteer may try out the activity itself with the staff taking the role of participants. This way, together, they can identify things that might not work as intended for all involved, and they can think through and test out the implications of the decisions being made with participants and potential

participants in mind. While being itself an inclusive process (in that it levels the playing field for volunteers, giving everyone a common source of support, no matter how confident they may be), this way of working with volunteers is also a way of centering the practice of designing for inclusion and full participation at every step. At its heart, the practice of inclusion requires a core commitment to tend to process and not only or primarily to end results.

The practice of inclusion is another practice that shifts the professional's role from expert and gatekeeper to being "in it together." The professional focusing on the practice of inclusion is more cultivator than consultant. The line between "participant" and "volunteer" is intentionally thin, and staff consistently invite people to step a toe over it, to practice contributing meaningfully to the group.

There are no easy formulas or scripts for this kind of inclusion. Over and over, staff set the tone for an inclusive community by being present and focusing on the experience of being a community, by demonstrating what that community-mindedness looks like, and by inviting others to do so, also. Encouraging experiences that include everyone. Moving graciously, not quickly, to be sure no one is left behind. Opening space so that conversations include everyone and become an exchange. Always acknowledging participants' freedom to choose their level of engagement.

A volunteer shared this Finnish saying by way of explaining why the inclusive, welcoming, and participatory spirit of a D-station, and the tone set by staff and volunteers there, matters so much: "So the forest responds, as you yell in it."

Provocations:

- How do you / your organization consistently invite people to contribute meaningfully in the spaces and activities you steward?
- How do you / your organization encourage participants to themselves practice inclusion?
- What are some barriers you have encountered in your work to cultivating space for meaningful participation?
- Most organizations would say in some way that they value inclusion. Do the culture/norms of your organization or profession reinforce the idea that inclusion is also a practice? How/how not?

The Practices

Practice: #5

The practice of dreaming

What is it?

The practice of consistently inviting people to imagine beyond what they already know is critical to building healthy, resilient communities. Civic action, leaning into collective problem solving together, doesn't come from confronting social reality, only. It depends also on the joyful cultivation of our imaginations, on the ability to see beyond what currently exists, and on our capacity to invite others to see what we see, also. We can call this the practice of dreaming.

This is the practice of encouraging people to dream together about the world we want to live in and inviting them to act together to bring that world into being. As a D-station staff member explains: “Dreaming is a skill, and it can be practiced. It is something that strengthens us and the community. With dreams comes hope and with hope comes action.” Practicing this skill requires bravery, a willingness to disrupt status quo norms. It also requires stillness and creativity; creating and holding space for dreaming in organizational and community-based settings is itself a highly imaginative act.

For example:

- During a CABLE (Community Action-Based Learning for Empowerment) process, a series of workshops run frequently at the D-stations and intended to help people find their own skills, strengths and interests in order to become community builders, the group is set loose to generate ideas for a community project. Just before this, one of the facilitators says, “Don’t think, what is *possible*. Reality will kick us in every angle later.”
- A volunteer calls a staff member with a concern about the club she is leading. Not many people are attending, and it feels like a struggle each week. The staff member invites the volunteer to return to the purpose that led her to start the club, and to dream again: “What would it look like if you had just what you needed?”
- A group of volunteers develops a “dreaming workshop,” an activity to take to festivals and events, that invites people to sit in a colorfully decorated “dreaming chair,” think about something they want/hope for/dream about at any level (self, family, community, world), and then write or draw that dream, leaving it behind to share with others in the ever-growing gallery of dreams. Staff support the workshop by asking tactical questions during the planning process, purchasing materials, and booking the workshop for upcoming events.
- A staff meeting conversation about supporting one another during a tense election season doesn’t go as planned and leaves some people feeling unheard. The person who facilitated the conversation returns to the group and asks, “What could it have looked like for you to feel seen and heard in that conversation? How can we imagine that conversation we shared differently?”
- A leader invites each member of her team to choose a place in their city to hold their next one on one check-in. The only stipulation is that it be a place (a neighborhood, park, cultural institution) they are genuinely interested in exploring. The point is to have a “wandering” conversation in a place that inspires learning and fresh thinking. At the very end of the time together, they consider the question, what came up for us today that relates to the way we are thinking about our work?
- A community organizer comes to a college class to speak about youth incarceration. She begins the class by asking the students to close their eyes and imagine they are getting in a spaceship, and traveling far, far away. When they land, she coaches them through imagining what a world without youth prisons looks like, feels like, sounds like.
- The first assignment for a 12-week urban gardening class is for participants to complete a survey called “Manifesting Your Farm.” The survey asks participants, many of whom do not currently have access to land, to describe the name, goals, vision, and even look and feel of the farm or garden they are imagining.

Why it matters:

It's not uncommon for people to encourage something called imagination in a workplace setting. *Dream Big! Think Bigger!* We like to celebrate the unfettered idea, the back of the napkin vision, the innovative spirit. But what is uncommon is for professionals engaged in community work to actively practice cultivating dreams, their own and others'. Perhaps this is because what feeds the space to dream doesn't always look like "work." Space. Playfulness. Joy. Movement. Rest. Finnish philosopher Esa Saarinen explains this as the difference between "task mind" and "rest state." When we are in task mind, "getting things done," we are engaged in thinking that is relevant to the tasks we are executing. It is in wakeful rest state that the mind can explore the margins, make new connections, reflect, find something unexpected. It is in rest state that we are able to reflect, recall personal memories, imagine the future (Saarinen, April 26 2023). It is in rest state that we can most readily dream.

What does this mean for professionals? The practice of inviting people to imagine beyond what is possible is a playful practice. It is not always about asking directly, *what do you want for your community? What can you do to contribute?* It is also about creating and holding the space in which people can exit "task mode" and enter "rest state." This might look like open cafe's where the task is simply to enjoy time together and connect. It might look like excursions and field trips or even at least in Finland, group karaoke. It definitely looks like gently nudging people back to the realm of the impossible, the unknown, the not yet imagined. It looks like inviting people to practice the skill of dreaming, in multiple ways, at multiple scales.

"Dreaming moves dreamers in some way from *me* to *we*."

And that is not a comfortable thing for most adult humans to practice. Most of us are conditioned to think that dreams are impractical or even a waste of time. At the very least, many of us have learned to keep our dreams buried, to think practically. As journalist Amanda Ripley puts it, "people very rarely get to talk or even think about what a better world is" (Ripley, 2023). We can think of dreaming, then, as what Annamarika Väekäs describes as "a foundational step in utopian thinking and action." It is not "an escapist or passive activity. It becomes a radical and necessary practice that enables individuals and communities to imagine different ways of being, knowing, and relating". (Väekäs 2025, p. 35.)

As Väekäs indicates, dreaming as a practice for cultivating civic action is not only the practice of setting individual dreams in motion. To be sure, dreaming is an individual act – as in, individuals need to practice knowing, naming, and sharing their dreams. But the practice of dreaming as described and documented here moves dreamers in some way from "me" to "we." In the CABLE process, for example, one way facilitators may invite participants to dream is by forming a circle, with backs to the center. As they choose, participants share a dream they have, big or small, and then turn towards the inside of the circle. Anyone who identifies as sharing that dream turns inward as well. In the dream workshop designed by D-station volunteers, dreams written or drawn by individuals are added to a "garden of dreams" and become food for thought in a follow up activity in which participants are invited to choose a dream from the garden that speaks to them.² In all these examples, individual dreams are positioned in relationship to and in dialogue with the group or community.

² The circle exercise, the dream workshop, and the garden of dreams are explained in full in Väekäs, pages 24-27, 29-33, 43-47.

In practicing dreaming as a tool for cultivating community-mindedness and civic action, we are embracing what activists and community organizers have long known. As Robin D.G. Kelley describes in his book *Freedom Dreams*, a book that documents the visions that propelled struggles for black freedom across contexts and time periods, the dreams were as important as what the movements accomplished. In his words succinctly: “Without new visions, we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down” (Kelley 2002, p. xii). In the face of our generally shared discomfort and lack of experience with dreaming, and especially with dreaming as a shared experience, we can learn and invite guidance from artists, poets and other creative visionaries whose territory is, always, the unimaginable, the not yet realized.

The consistent, playful invitation to dream, to keep dreaming, to dream together to dream no matter what is one way we can cultivate the conditions in which we can together create a better world. The logic here isn’t that if you dream it, it will happen. It’s that if we forget how to dream, nothing different will. Pausing to imagine creates a space that’s more creative than reactive. And it is in this space that we find the possibility of seeing the conditions in which we live, and the possibility of, in some way, interrupting them. Dreaming, hoping, wishing, imagining, allows us to remember that we have choices, that we are inside structures that have been imagined, and can be imagined again. When we are free to dream beyond what is necessary, or possible, or realistic, then we are also free to create the world we want to live in together, right now, right here.

Provocations:

- How are you inviting people to think beyond what seems possible or realistic? What is scary about doing this for them and for you?
- What does it/would it/could it look like to cultivate “wakeful rest state” in your work, with your colleagues and participants?
- What messages, implicit or explicit, about the value of and place for imagination and dreaming have you received from your profession or organization?

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Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to colleagues at the Deaconess Foundation and at the University of Richmond for the conversation and thought partnership that directly shaped the ideas represented here. Specifically, I thank: **Laura Hakoköngäs, Saija Karjala, Virpi Still, Jasmin Rajamaa, Annamari Väekäs, Susanna Laitinen, Vili Kinnunen, Taru Tuomola, Tarja Jalli, Martta Shiberu, Saara Simonen, Maiju Lehto, Milla Kreft, Päivi Pääskyvuori, Maija Hyle, Olli Holmström**, and the entire staff of the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Richmond. For their responses to earlier drafts of this report and the ideas it contains I thank **Tommi Laitio, Paula Winch, Lynn Pelco, Eeva-Mari Miettinen**, and students in the Spring 2025 “Finnish Social and Health Service System and Community Work” class at TAMK University. I also want to extend my deepest gratitude to the University of Richmond and to the staff and board of the Fulbright Finland Foundation, for their generosity in supporting the research leave that made this project possible. Fulbright Finland’s Mid-Career Professional Development Award is a model for the entire Fulbright network, and the paragon of egalitarian learning exchange.

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