

Arran Civic Trust: 7 April 2011



Alastair McIntosh on Rekindling Community: Identity, Values and Place

This was a talk that truly involved the audience as Alastair initially asked everyone present what questions and areas of discussion were in their mind to have tackled during the evening. From these flowed ideas, strategies covering a variety of topics:

- Island communities: loss of knowing everyone
- Incomers and born islanders and the issues arising from that mix. The importance of inclusion and sharing of skills and experiences from everyone
- Lack of communication and less trust on the island
- The built environment of the island and its changes- lack of awareness in local authority regarding rural housing rather than estates of urban dwellings. The importance of sensitive development
- Living with land and sea- our environment
- Life with perspectives and building resilience in the island's young people
- The importance of role models in the community for young people
- How island communities give back to other areas and are not a "drain" on resources
- Lack of understanding from North Ayrshire Council and others about the island

Alastair was born in Doncaster and raised on the Isle of Lewis. His father's roots were there and he returned with the family and practised as a GP. Throughout the talk and questions from the audience Alastair interwove his own experiences, especially as a child and young person, as illustrative about the interdependence of community and the development of the young to be resilient and take managed risks: he told the great story of heading off to fish by himself, in worsening weather determined to make it, knowing various binoculars were

trained on him- so learning resilience and yet knowing there is an almost invisible hand of care in the community too; all leading to self respect and respect for the “elders” or those with knowledge learned through life’s experience. He sees resilience as an export when young people leave the island community, and this is important to remember when islands are told they are “subsidised” by the mainland. The island gives a great deal to our area, to careers and other communities off the island.

The community is about creating synergies out of the diverse skills of islanders, whether their families have been here for 100 years or one. Tapping into different skills and experiences and welcoming them, will build a more resilient community able to face change. No one has a monopoly of knowledge or skills. We learn from each other. Listening and sharing are vital ingredients to a community.

He spoke about our cycle of belonging in communities. The learning to share feelings both in joy and suffering; the capacity to respond to others. Whilst at times we may feel people know too much about us individually, when the really difficult times arise the community supports and cares for us. Community cohesion and regeneration go together.

Alastair also talked of the G-spot- whether you call it God, spirituality, understanding self, the ability to reflect, go inwards to develop the god in ourselves, to find the richness of self development, to let go of some of the ego. This will contribute to our understanding of us in a place.

Belonging to a place; a sense of place contributes to a real sense of our own identity where local initiatives are important bedrock. The farmers markets, ARCAS, local societies all contribute to the sense of “our Place”. This sense of identity embodies relationships and includes our values. Knowing ourselves is an important development. In this cycle these values give rise to our sense of responsibility to each other and our community. He described the sharing of resources and energy in the crofting community when there was a national seaman’s strike. Community regeneration comes from reinforcing these four areas:

- Sense of place
- Sense of identity
- Sense of values
- Sense of responsibility

Alastair works with the GalGael Trust in Govan. At present he lives in Drumoyne and experiences every day in working with young people that they have little resilience- and seek to prop themselves up with alcohol and drugs. The loss of many roles, apprenticeships, and role models has been devastating in Govan. There is estrangement which leads to despair and defiance in young people. The changes in the last 30 years have meant a loss of resilience and the learning “how to be a man”. Govan has X5 rate of hospital admission due to drugs and x7

the rate of hospital admissions due to alcohol abuse compared to the rest of Scotland. The GalGael Trust works with young people, helping them to relate through their five outer senses through woodworking as well as learning about themselves. He contrasted these experiences with his own growing up on Lewis and going out with a much older man in the community to learn to fish and handle a boat.

It was clear that as Alastair talked so those in the audience were reflecting on Arran, our place; those community activities each of us is involved with and which give Arran a sense of identity along with its history and ever present environment around us of the land, mountains, sea and sky; the values of this island community and the responsibility we each take to ensure the needs of islanders and visitors are met. He is also a great believer in the “complaints committee”. If Arran feels misunderstood by the Council or others, we need to be sure we do not just complain on the island to ourselves, but that our needs are heard off the island, and those off the island understand the contribution the island and islanders make to the welfare and wellbeing of the whole of society. He said that he noticed on the ferry on his way over that people started to relax, there was a change in mood. The sea, the ferry and making the journey helped people to unwind. What a contribution therefore Arran makes to society even before the ferry ties up in Brodick.

Arran Civic Trust hopes to invite Alastair back to Arran for a day of shared discussion in 2012.

See: Alastair McIntosh (2008) “Rekindling Community” Connecting People, Environment and Spirituality. Schumacher Briefings 15: Green Books