

How To Weave Social Fabric

3 Essential Pillars For a New Mutual Aid Community

I published [the Microsolidarity proposal](#) a year ago and really struck a chord with people. I'm overdue to give folks an update, and there's really a lot of exciting news. So first I'll give a quick recap, then I'll share what's happening in 2020.

The essence of the original proposal was to start a small exclusive community, oriented towards a deep kind of mutual aid: where we support each other in our personal growth, generating health and prosperity for our collective, while producing significant benefits that ripple out into wider society. I explained that I have experienced this kind of community once before at [Enspiral](#), and now I want to learn how to start more of them. I introduced some specific words, like "**congregation**" for a community like this (<200 people), and "**crew**" for a small densely connected group (<8 people). The purpose of the crew to provide reciprocal peer-to-peer support for its members, who could be engaged in any kind of meaningful work: e.g. freelancer co-op, a learning club, activist collective. The purpose of the congregation is to make it easy for new crews to form and to support each other's development.

The raw numbers tell some of the story: [the Medium post](#) was read about 10,000 times, [the website](#) has been viewed by people in 71 countries, it spawned a

handful of [podcast interviews and articles](#), and about 100 people have joined the [Loomio discussion group](#).

I've written popular stories before, but there was something qualitatively different about the response I got to this one, something deeper than the numbers show. The response was so significant, it actually changed my sense of myself.

When I wrote the original story, I thought my role was to start a new community. But the response that I got, in addition to being really warm and encouraging, was also a bunch of people essentially saying, *"Rich, we're already doing this. It's really great that you've articulated it in a precise and new way. That's very helpful. But you don't need to do **everything**."*

So now my role has clarified: I can just focus on the part that I can make a unique contribution to. Now I think my job is not so much about starting a community, it's more like a librarian or a curator: giving names to things, putting in the distinctions and categories that help people navigate, and telling stories.

So in this post, I'll tell you my plan for 2020, and then I'll articulate my best guess of what is needed to initiate a new mutual aid community.

Microsolidarity 2020

These are the “congregations” I’m directly involved with this year:

- I’ve joined the Board at **Enspiral**, my home congregation. A small group of us are going to plant a seed for a new local Enspiral community in Europe, probably with a first gathering in August ([join the newsletter](#) if you want updates).
- My company [The Hum](#) has partnered with [AlterEgo](#) to produce 3 gatherings for people at the intersection of politics and developmental culture. If that’s you, [apply here](#). We’re able to do this with the generous support of [Guerrilla Foundation](#) & [Lunt Foundation](#).
- I’m contributing to the **Totnes Convergence** in the UK in June (you can [apply to join](#) us). One interesting aspect of this event is that it’s coordinated through [Autopia](#) a new social network developed by Enspiral contributor Stephen Reid, which may prove to be very useful for other congregations.
- I’m a contributing member of the **Community Weavers Guild**, a private network of about 50 people supporting each other to develop our facilitation and community-weaving skills. This is where I practice contributing without being in the centre of the action!

So as you can see I’m involved in many community experiments in parallel. I’m looking for patterns that match across different contexts. I’ll keep prototyping methods and language, and reporting what I learn on the [Microsolidarity website](#).

3 Pillars for a New Mutual Aid Community

As I'm in "starting out" mode with all of these groups, my current focus is **how to start well**. I'm going to use the rest of this post to document my current thinking, the minimum set of scaffolding required to start a new mutual aid community. At the moment, I think you need **precisely three pillars** to start a new mutual aid community, no more and no less. This is a snapshot of my current thinking, I expect it all to change, but I think it is useful to capture this version as an unvarnished stack of opinions.

1. Initiators

Number one. Who is initiating this new congregation?

People in the [Art of Hosting](#) network talk about a "caller", someone who senses some great potential and calls out to others: *Will you join me? Can we do something together?* In the g0v community [they call them "diggers"](#), people who create a hole for other people to "fill up". If you're familiar with Peter Koenig's work, you might call them the "[source](#)". I haven't settled on a name, but I instinctively reach for "host" because I think "hospitality" is their main job.

Whatever you call them, a new community starts with one or a few people. There are some initiators, who form the first seed for the community to crystallise around.

Think about what qualities you want to see in your community (generosity, care, courage, wisdom, etc). The people who are going to initiate this community need to **already embody** some of those qualities. So you need to know what attributes you're looking for. You need some kind of filtering and discernment so you can be confident that you are starting with some of the right ingredients.

When I'm looking for co-hosts, I want people with psychological and emotional depth, people with experience in conflict transformation, people who've sat in circle a hundred times before, people who have inherited some of the subtle interpersonal wisdom that comes from any multigenerational lineage of community practice. There are some administrative skills needed in the core too, people who are familiar with the practical work of organising events, pooling money, dealing with taxes, etc.

These qualities are the "starter dough" that you bring to a new batch of sourdough bread. The people who are initiating the community, the original hosts, need to be steeped in a specific culture. You need to be confident in their capacity and commitment to be in community.

Before inviting the community in, the core hosting team also needs to learn how to collaborate. **It's very hard for a group to harmonise, when the people in the core are not in harmony with each other.**

When the fermentation process is complete, there's no distinction between the starter dough and the rest of the loaf. So the hosts need to get out of the way as soon as possible, and share the ownership and leadership. Step back too soon, and the group will flounder for lack of direction. Step back too late, and people will leave or initiate conflict as they feel you getting in the way of their growth.

This first pillar, in my view, is the limiting factor to the spread of microsolidarity: I think these "initiator" people are usually full up with their own local work, and don't instinctively see the bigger picture, the potential we catalyse when we come together well. And then there are the usual challenges with any new initiative, the

“teething problems” of forming a new team, and the balancing act of leadership in community.

2. Gatherings

The second pillar. You need to host really good gatherings.

I can't describe it better than what Ria Baeck (contributor to both the [Percolab](#) and Enspiral congregations) wrote [in this blog](#): *“These retreats and gatherings aim to build an experience of community, pay a lot of attention to building relationships, seek the collective intelligence of all present and mostly support the commons in one way or another.”*

I don't know exactly what are the crucial patterns here, but I think the gathering needs to be at least 3 days and nights. The size is important, it has to be big enough to work like a dating pool, but small enough that it's possible for everyone to feel reasonably comfortable with everyone else after a couple of days. I guess it needs to be more than 12 people and less than 40, something like that. I want a circle that's small enough so that I can listen to everyone speaking in turn, without overrunning my attention span. But it needs to be big enough to bring out a lot of archetypes so I can see myself reflected in others, and diverse enough for new collaborations to form from little knots of complementary skills and orientations.

In those gatherings, you can do all kinds of stuff. But the really crucial thing is that you visit four spaces:

1. Self: spend time in private reflection. This could be unstructured, like a solo walk in the forest. Or you could have a journaling session where someone asks good questions and everyone quietly writes their reflections.

2. Pair: spend some time intentionally practicing the basics of 1-to-1 relationship: this could be anything from communication practice (authentic speaking + active listening) to cooking a meal or going for a walk together.
3. Subgroup: spend some time in small groups, probably 4-6 people is best, so it is easy for everyone to speak and listen. You could talk about a shared project, or talk about your experience of the day, or all respond to a provocative question, whatever.
4. Whole: finally, you need to spend time as a whole group, probably in a circle. Don't talk *about* things, talk *with* each other. The circle I'm thinking of gets progressively deeper and more intimate with each passing day. We're heading towards shared presence, reverence, limitless acceptance, and extraordinary listening, the kind of listening that incubates a collective identity that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

For more ideas about how to run these gatherings, see the [congregating](#) section of the Microsolidarity website.

You know it's working when people say things like *"I've known some of you for only 2 days but I feel more connection and acceptance and trust than I have with some of my friends I've known for 20 years."*

I think the important factor is to make sure that you're doing a good job of those four categories: self, pair, subgroup, whole. Probably what's going to happen is in one of those four spaces, people are going to have major breakthroughs, they might release trauma or pick up new insights into their own limiting beliefs. A lot of people will get really high and excited and energised and be ready to commit to some new action that they didn't have the energy for before they arrived at the gathering, i.e. a peak experience.

Health & Safety Warning: *As you can imagine, this can be a vulnerable space. If you access some deep psychological territory without appropriate support, you can get hurt. This is why I emphasise the qualities of the hosts; they have a huge responsibility here, to not invite in more than they can hold. And there's a further risk, people can be manipulated while they're "high". So I've added a section to the Microsolidarity site to help people understand [how cults work](#). Perhaps these anti-patterns are at least as important to document as the patterns.*

3. Crews

Step three: you need to integrate that peak experience.

It's kinda easy to *initiate* a peak experience: just join a good personal growth workshop, or go to Burning Man, or climb a mountain with your best friend. You know you're peaking when you feel a cascade of insight, inspiration, affection, curiosity, release, etc.

Initiating the peak is easy, the hard bit is *integrating* that temporary highlight into your everyday life. My best guess for how to integrate a peak experience is to do it in a crew, a small peer-coaching circle that meets periodically over a few months.

I recommend starting with four or five people who have shared a peak experience. Agree to meet at the same time every week/ fortnight/ month, for an hour or 90 minutes.

If you're looking for some guidance for what to do in these meetings, see the [Crewing page](#) on the Microsolidarity website. You can coach each other through professional challenges, or talk about your goals, or make an open space for people to vent distressing emotions... whatever suits.

The **rhythm** is important, it reduces the coordination overhead, and it elevates the priority that this group takes up in amongst all your other commitments. You could emulate other congregations like [Permalab](#) and [Liminal Village](#) and sync your rhythm to the moon.

When you start, agree to meet say 5 or 10 times and set a date for a review. Reflect together: *what did we like about that experience? where is there room for improvement in how we meet? do we want to keep going together? should we try some different methods? should we disintegrate this crew and regroup with new members?*

Weaving Social Fabric

This is my hypothesis: these three pillars are my best guess for how you weave social fabric. Start with a great hosting team, have a first gathering, initiate a bunch of crews, and then come back for a second gathering 6 or 12 months later to celebrate and start the next cycle.

The objective of focussing on these three pillars is to cultivate a density of relationships, reciprocity, care, attention, and inspiration. We're weaving a basket, a carpet, a platform for all kinds of other life-giving activities: people will start companies or they'll build cohousing units or they'll make babies or they'll write great books or launch social movements. In my view, all of these activities go better when they are held by a generative community of mutual aid.

If you're reading this and you're feeling inspired to action, here are some things you can do:

- **Contribute to the research:** If you know of more communities that match the patterns I've named here, I'd love to add them to [my list of](#)

[congregations](#). If you have experience with any small-group modalities that suit crews (e.g. any kind of peer-coaching method like [Case Clinic](#)), please let me know so I can add it to [the list](#). Leave me a comment or ping me [on Twitter](#).

- If you are involved in, say, a fellowship network, membership organisation, or an amazing conference, and **you want support** to make it more like a congregation, contact us at [The Hum](#). We're happy to help
- If you want to be **notified of updates**, [join my newsletter](#).
- If you want to **discuss Microsolidarity with others**, [join the Loomio group](#).
- If you want to **support my work** as an opinionated librarian/curator, you can [give me money on Patreon](#).
- If you want to **contact me**, please see the [guidance on my website](#), as I am frequently overwhelmed by interesting strangers :)

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