



## PRAISE FOR AN OTHER KINGDOM

Whenever Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight get together on the topic of community, the outcome is both inspirational and practical. That's been the case for years, and it's the case once again with this fine book. At a time when so many are being left behind by our culture of individualism, competition, and consumerism, this book—with its emphasis on remembering that we're all in this together and have gifts that can help meet others' needs—is a grounded call to compassion and justice.

**Parker J. Palmer**, author of *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, and *Let Your Life Speak*

Walter Brueggemann teams up with two veteran community organizers to not only astutely analyze our current North American context but also give us specific, practical ways we can move toward greater neighborliness for the common good. Hard-hitting judgment and joyful encouragement all in one book.

**Will Willimon**, professor of Christian Ministry, Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina, and United Methodist Bishop (ret.)

To change the conversation, it's necessary to understand what is wrong with the one we're currently having. Block, Brueggemann, and McKnight do just that. Original and illuminating. Prophetic and liberating!

**Robert Inchausti**, author of *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, *Subversive Orthodoxy*, and *The Ignorant Perfection of Ordinary People*

These gentle men, the authors of this book, are “waiting for a social movement”—one that will of necessity restore our neighborhoods and our humanity. They intuit it. *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture* is a statement of their longing. The book is not sentimental. John McKnight, for one, is a trained Alinsky organizer. He knows the realities of Chicago's streets, of its notorious projects, of its vibrant churches, of its very democratic soul. But he's rather hopeful of fundamental economic, social, and cultural transformation, reminiscent of economist Fritz Schumacher.

“Our basic intent in writing this book is to shrink the market as the primary means of cultural identity, schools as source of learning, systems as the source of care, price as the measure of value, productivity as the basis for being.” And so they have done. The movement they seek is waiting for us.

**Susan Witt**, Schumacher Center for a New Economics

*An Other Kingdom* is not just for people of faith, it is a gift for anyone who seeks to understand how we can become better at being human together. Its

authors are modern-day Magi. In place of gold, Peter, Walter, and John offer common wealth; in place of frankincense they offer mystery; and in place of myrrh they offer neighborliness. As the free market falls like a house of cards around our ears and the captains of industry draw our planet toward the precipice, this book offers sight of a sustainable and sustaining future.

**Cormac Russell**, author of *Asset-Based Community Development: Looking Back to Look Forward*, managing director of Nurture Development, faculty member of ABCD Institute, and lead steward for ABCD in Europe

We've had enough End Times theology based on fear and revenge. It's time for an End-of-Our-Time theology based on faith, hope, and love. That's what *An Other Kingdom* provides. . . . Unlike many books that merely tell us how bad things are, leaving us anxious and depressed, these author-activists provide us with an alternative vision of a neighborly society, one that draws upon our deepest sacred and secular traditions and is already being constructed by ordinary people in many local communities.

**Walter T. Davis**, professor (emeritus), San Francisco Seminary

Here begins the A-B-C of indigenous common sense in most cultures based on good relationships and shared meaning. An alternative culture detailed by Peter Block, Walter Brueggemann, and John McKnight is in actuality something extending from ancient patterns of survival. This (k)new language of covenant re-kindles trust and service to higher principles and helps us recognize each other again.

**Manulani Aluli Meyer**, former associate professor of education at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo and world scholar-practitioner of Hawaiian and indigenous epistemology

For those who have that feeling deep inside them that something is seriously wrong with the reigning economy but cannot quite put their finger on it or cannot conceive of anything different replacing it, this book is crucial. . . . The language of this book is clear as it pushes us toward a different kind of life, a different way for life, and different conditions for living.

**Olivia C. Saunders**, New Providence, The Bahamas

This is the work of three wise elders who have spent a lifetime of inquiry into the human good. . . . *An Other Kingdom* questions and provides alternatives to the dominant assumptions that guide our aspirations, our choices, and hence our lives. As long as these local and global narratives remain unexamined, they will continue to have the power to persuade us and our neighbors to act unknowingly against our best interests. The language within is beautifully economic and precise. It is best read slowly with reflection, as one would read poetry.

**Ward Mailliard**, vice president and member of the executive board at Mount Madonna School, Watsonville, California



## SELECTED OTHER WORKS BY

### **PETER BLOCK**

*The Answer to How Is Yes*

*Community: The Structure of Belonging*

*Stewardship*

### **WALTER BRUEGGEMANN**

*Journey to the Common Good*

*The Prophetic Imagination*

*Theology of the Old Testament*

### **JOHN McKNIGHT**

*The Abundant Community*, with Peter Block

*Building Communities from the Inside Out*, with John P. Kretzmann

*The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits*

PETER  
**BLOCK**

WALTER  
**BRUEGGEMANN**

JOHN  
**McKNIGHT**



AN  
OTHER  
KINGDOM

DEPARTING THE CONSUMER CULTURE

WILEY

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*To all those who have struggled to show us the way to an other kingdom.*



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## SIGNS OF THE TIMES

*You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.*

—Matt. 16:3

**T**he intent of this book is to interpret certain signs of the times. These signs have to do with the need to depart the consumer market culture we have come to take for granted. This culture, with its constellations of empire and kingdom, produces endless conversations about climate warming, restoring the middle class in the northern economies, worldwide immigration driven by poverty, and political instability. We talk about financial bubbles, accessible health care, economic growth and contraction. We all want more companies to come to town, more factory jobs, more graduates in education, less crime and violence, everywhere. We seek more consumption and faster growth.

The premise of this book is that these conversations, generationally passed on as seemingly based on knowledge, science, and the assumption of progress, miss the signs of the times. All of these conversations are painfully predictable and at times despairing. They are symptoms of something more fundamental. Our belief is that the current programs, investments, or changes in political leadership will make modest improvements but little real difference. If we want to follow the signs of the times, we have to look at how our core economic beliefs have produced a culture that makes poverty, violence, ill health, and fragile economic systems seem inevitable.

Economic systems based on competition, scarcity, and acquisitiveness have become more than a question of economics; they have become the kingdom within which we dwell. That way of thinking invades our

social order, our ways of being together, and what we value. It replicates the kingdom of ancient Egypt, Pharaoh's kingdom. It produces a consumer culture that centralizes wealth and power and leaves the rest wanting what the beneficiaries of the system have.

We invite you to a journey of departure from this consumer culture. We ask you to imagine an alternative set of economic beliefs that have the capacity to evoke a culture where poverty, violence, and shrinking well-being are not inevitable—a culture in which the social order produces enough for all. This, like reading fiction, requires a suspension of belief. Except in this case, what we take as true and inevitable is the fiction. This departure into another kingdom might be closer to the reality of our nature and what works best for our humanity. This other kingdom better speaks to the growing longing for an alternative culture, an alternative way of being together. We use the word *kingdom* in the title to remember the ancient stream we are drinking from. Kingdom, in its ambiguity, also speaks to both the sacred and the secular: sacred as in the Kingdom of God; secular as in the Chinese Middle Kingdom and the prevalence of kingdoms before the nation state was imagined and constructed in the nineteenth century.

We use the word *departing* to remember and re-perform the Israelites' Exodus into the wilderness away from Egypt, for the journey into a social order not based on consumption seems equally imposing.

Luckily, the exodus from a consumer, globalized culture into a neighborly, localized communal and cooperative culture has begun. We join the chorus of other agents of the alternative economy: food hubs, cooperative and social enterprises, the climate change activists, health activists, plus beacons of light like *Yes* magazine, the Democracy Collaborative, the Schumacher Center for a New Economics, Mondragon, and the Happiness streams emanating from the Dali Lama, Bhutan, economists like Mark Anielski, and architects like Christopher Alexander and Ross Chapin.

Our intent is to give name and visibility to these signs of the times, to add a small thread in solidarity with the un-credentialed voices and uncollateralized entrepreneurs who are rewriting our economic and communal narrative.

A cautionary note: We have written this departure narrative as a slow spiraling dialogue around a core set of ideas. We keep coming back to the dominant consumer culture story and the alternative neighborly culture story, hoping to add depth and nuance to the central point, in much the same way that we relish slow food, walkable distances, and time to reflect.



## INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT IS DECISIVE

Let us begin by describing the nature of the consumer kingdom. We live within a dominant cultural narrative best described as the Free Market Consumer Ideology. This is a totalizing narrative, which provides the water within which most of our ideas and actions swim. The time is right to change the water and thereby the kingdom that it nourishes.

The Free Market Consumer Ideology is an economic narrative in which:

*Free* means that there should be few constraints on individuals and institutions. It signifies the elevation of individual rights. The freedom to do business and to privatize the common assets such as government, air, water and the land, as it suits us. This appropriated language of economic freedom is welded to the idea of democracy.

*Market* means that how we conduct commerce is a first priority. It is not just a place of buying and selling, it is a world view. An invisible hand, perhaps an instrument of God. It is touted as the essential element of democracy. If it must be protected by military action at home and abroad, which it does, then so be it.

*Consumer* means that our capacity to purchase is the measure of our well-being and our identity. That what is essential to life—such as raising children, our health, our safety, our care—can be outsourced and purchased. It also means that whatever we have is not enough.

*Ideology* means that our beliefs about Free, about Market, and about Consumer are True. Beyond question. Expressions of our real nature.

These are much more than a set of beliefs about an economy. These consumer market concepts shape and commodify the social order. They define our culture. This narrative is the lens through which we raise our children, tell the news, create our livelihood, label who is in and out, distribute empire, and define how we live. It identifies what really matters in the end and establishes the nature of our social relationships. It is the final word—the bottom line, to use its own terminology.

This book is an invitation to imagine social relationships ordered differently. Social relationships ordered around an alternative narrative that is founded on the ideas of neighborliness and covenant. A social order not based on the conception of consumption and contract.

Neighborliness means that our well-being and what really matters is close at hand and can be locally constructed or produced. In this modern time, neighborliness is considered quaint and nostalgic. To make neighborliness the center of our social order requires an act of imagination. It is counter-cultural. It is also a form of social interaction that is built on a covenant that serves the common good.

In order to imagine a mode of social interaction that serves the commons, we must become aware of the way social relationships are dominantly ordered among us now. It is difficult to see what we are swimming in. It is hard to imagine there is an alternative to what we consider to be true and inevitable.

Understanding the current social order is important because the cultural narrative is decisive. It has the power of context. It decides who has access to social power and social goods, and how people who are not deciders relate to the ones who do decide. The consumer and market authority we live within violates neighborly relations by stratifying social power according to money and its attendants—privilege, competition, self-interest, entitlement, surplus. The dominant modes of current social relationships fend off neighborliness at all costs, and at great cost.

The market ideology says that neighborly relationships are no longer required. That we are best ordered by commercializing all we can. That what we needed from neighbors can be obtained anywhere. The tools for livelihood have been stolen and replaced by the machines of contract. In this a culture is lost, superseded by the new reality. The major early step toward the modern cultural reality was “enclosure,”

the privatizing of the common land. Now we offshore in the name of globalization and outsource in the name of market efficiency. Every human endeavor is monetized. We now work for a living. In the move to industrialization, and the move to the cities, we left our local culture behind. The family became dependent on adult earnings outside a local culture, and we became laborers, wage earners. When we human beings are called laborer, wage earner, bread winner, it impacts our souls. Until industrialization came along, the concept of labor did not exist. Being paid based on the number of hours worked was inconceivable. When a person's effort was converted to wage earner, a person became an object. An object of cost and efficiency, an asset.

We moved away from the neighbor as a source of culture, memory, sense of place, and livelihood. We made subsistence living a problem to be solved. The casualty was the loss of a sense of the commons. What is at stake in the renewal of neighborliness is the restoration of the commons. The free market consumer ideology has produced a social disorder; people are no longer embedded in a culture that serves the common wealth, the common good.

Where we are headed in this book is to further the belief that to seek neighborliness and the common good means a shift in narrative. It is about reframing how we take our communal identity. Here we are proposing to identify what has been considered sacred language and use it as an opening into the experience of community and the commons. We are trying to lay out a faith narrative without the negative traces of sectarianism:

*Faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

—Hebrews 11.1

This alternative narrative is not about the church, or religion, or certain values; these are at the center of the dominant current narrative, in which they become an argument. This faith narrative is about language and its transformative power.

The sacred language includes the words of covenant, vow, liturgy, re-performance, silence, mystery, and fallibility. This language and the experience it provokes become an alternative to the current dominant

ideology from which we take our identity as a western culture, which is from the free market consumer society's affection for contract, scarcity, entertainment, newness, certainty, perfection, privatization, and the primacy of individual rights and interests.

## THE LANDSCAPE OF THE MARKET WORLD

As a quick view of the landscape of the market and consumer world, we begin with a brief history of the free market consumer ideology:

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| Early Days | Eve becomes the first consumer. She follows the advice of the serpent, the first consultant. Eve picks the low-hanging fruit.  |
| 1582       | Pope Gregory XIII refines the calendar. We lose eleven days in the process. We gain agreement on common dates for shipping, arrivals, and departures.  |
| 1607       | Privatization of commons intensifies as James I enforces enclosure in Britain.   |
| 1776       | Adam Smith writes in <i>The Wealth of Nations</i> that only the self-interest of the butcher will get your meat cut.   |
| 1843       | Standard length of an inch established.  |
| 1847       | Railway Clearing House in Great Britain adopts Greenwich Mean Time.  |
| 1949       | President Harry S Truman declares in 1949 Inaugural Address that much of the world of the south and far-east suffers from underdevelopment. This came as a surprise to them.   |
| 1970       | Milton Friedman declares in a <i>Time</i> magazine article that the sole purpose of business is to generate profit for shareholders. Any social purpose would be spending shareholder money and turn executives into civil servants. |
| 2001       | President George W. Bush urges the American people to go shopping as a response to 9/11.   |
| 2014       | The Dow Jones Industrial Average closes above 18,000 for the first time, a comforting sign that the system is working.   |

## ENCLOSURE

Enclosure is a place to start to deconstruct the free market narrative. Before the enclosure movement began, there were, in the British Isles and elsewhere, extensive public lands. Lands on which local residents could create a life and a livelihood. Common land on which to fish, farm, hunt, and be housed. Enclosure, actively begun in the sixteenth century and reinforced by James I, fenced in the public lands and made them private. There were protests and battles over the years, but after a couple of hundred years, virtually all the public lands went into private ownership. The landless working class became “labor” to service the machine, and the land went to feeding sheep. More profitable than feeding people.

The end result was a culture ordered by private interests. Commerce became married to king. What was produced was a culture that abandoned subsistence living and the values of local economy; it became a market devoted to scale, speed, and cost. A market that sanctified buying and selling. A culture where place, history, and tradition became irrelevant. A market culture based on contracts and void of covenantal relationships.

## COVENANTAL VERSUS CONTRACTUAL ORDER

The language of covenant speaks to a market built on neighborliness, kinship, and common ownership. These are the cornerstones of the neighborly economy. An other kingdom. A covenantal relationship is based on a vow. It requires an act of imagination about neighborliness. You cannot point to covenant. You can only point to specific performances of covenant. Generosity, for example, is a specific performance of covenant. We are most familiar with the marriage vow. This is in our terms an act of neighborliness in which we choose to expend ourselves in care for someone who has no claim except personal needs and being in relationship. It is an act of fidelity that we could easily have avoided. We do not have to make that vow. Yet we felt summoned in some way to do it.

The modern consumer market economy is based on contract rather than covenant. A contractual relationship is based on a specific

exchange of interests. It has a date and a dollar sign and a specific balanced exchange. For example, if you say I promise to give you \$10.00, that's not a contract because nothing is specified in return. A contract is also time limited, it has a date. If I give you \$10.00 and you promise to return it to me, it still is not a contract until you specify when you will pay it back. A covenant, by contrast, is free of specifics, free of date, and free of something in return.

When the public good is replaced with concern for private rights, we substitute a contract for what was covenant. When this happens we become ordered for scarcity instead of abundance. Time is contracted and we become concerned about speed. Certainty replaces mystery. Perfection substitutes for fallibility. Individual rights trump the common good, the common wealth.

A covenant is not without its risks. It demands reciprocity over time and violating it has its consequences: for example, loss of trust and consequent isolation. Covenant is a different way of ordering social relationships. It leads to a more intimate, a more interdependent way of being. Contracts are more based on agreement between autonomous individuals.

## THE NEIGHBORLY COVENANT

Our task is to imagine a culture ordered differently. Imagine the human benefit of an alternative to the market ideology that defines our culture. We call this the Neighborly Covenant because it enlivens and humanizes the social order.

The Neighborly Covenant is an alternative to a market ideology that has reached its limits, no matter how high the Dow Jones Industrial Average climbs. The map we have really isn't working. It is visibly flawed. We see in every political campaign a rhetoric designed solely for marketing the candidate, not for meaning. We force all politicians into promising what they can't deliver. It becomes a concentrated version of the consumer ideology. Citizen as consumer, candidate as supplier. And so we campaign and vote on marketing slogans: liberal, conservative, values, democracy, end poverty, maintain standard of living, jobs, education, marriage this, guns that. These catchphrases are just

code words, like advertising, that exploit people's needs and anxiety for the sake of candidate market share, namely winning their votes. This language is another subversion of the common good and the longing for public servants. We think the wish for an alternative culture will be fulfilled in the ballot box.

What we are proposing is language for alternative ways to a covenantal culture. The free market consumer ideology has defined the dominant codes, that particular way of talking about our culture. This is what has led us to stalemate. Our work is to create another set of code words—ones that are active beyond election years and have different substance in defining our communal identity. This is the departure. But first we want to be even clearer about what we are departing from.