

In 2020 Chutney developed a fascination with chickens. During our walks, he felt an irresistible attraction to the chickens that had begun materialising in the front yards of Thornbury. Whether they appeared due to a survival instinct in a moment of empty supermarket shelves or from nostalgia of a time when the backyard coop was a regular feature was not clear. What *was* clear, to Chutney at least, was that these creatures demanded scrutiny while they scratched and pecked through kitchen scraps and seed mix.

One gloomy winter morning on our usual route, I noticed something different. Outside a Californian style duplex, someone had fixed a cardboard sheet with zip-ties to the waist-high front fence. On it were two polaroids, each of a tiny chicken. Chutney, sensing interest, sniffed the air. Through the fence were two, if not quite baby chicks then chicken adolescents.

Developed enough for beige feathers and the red dangly bits on their head - known, I would learn through subsequent research, as the comb (top bit) and wattle (bit beneath the chin) - they had not acquired the adult plumpness in breast and thigh. To the cardboard, a pen was attached and a naming competition proposed, the winners with the best suggestions would be awarded the high honour of naming the birds.

Each day we stopped while Chutney pawed through the fence at the two teen chicks pecking away, oblivious to his existence. This gave me pause to admire the growing list of names.

Sometimes parents with children were pointing out the chickens, at others, couples were locked in fierce debate trying to distill the essence of a chicken into a name. The board and the chickens, it seemed, were becoming a local lightning rod.

By the scrawled hand, suggestions like “Rainbow Sparkle,” “cool dude” or the zen-like “water” were clearly children. One, from what I imagined to be a precocious older child, came a

suggestion that had plumbed the depths of their lexicon and, perhaps a Greek heritage, to retrieve “Syncretica”. Who I would discover was named after Saint Syncretica of Alexandria but intended here to mean “bringing together” as suggested in parenthesis below.

It’s impossible to say whether such a competition could have been so successful before lockdown. I think not. I also think it meant more than soliciting chicken names. As an act of inspiration it represented nothing less than a change in the relationship between residents and their street. What was once thoroughfares between home, work and shops streets had become places for civic engagement. It wasn’t just the chickens. Signs of this change were literally underfoot as children chalked footpaths in rainbow designs and hopscotch that ran to a florid watercolours when it rained. Community was returning to the streets.

This, I chalked up to a break in routines. People had shifted their gaze from distant horizons and ambitions to refocus onto immediate surroundings. I call this happy COVID side-effect - “looking up”. One epiphany derived from “looking up” was that *these* people, *these* streets were ‘my community’.

Now, I have no pre-pandemic data to validate this theory, but I would swear that then, when walking along those streets, you were more likely to receive a smile when passing a stranger. The greeting “owzitgoin?” had become a genuine question, as in “how is it *really* going?” I was also told about Whatsapp groups where neighbours who had rarely spoken, were now buying groceries for those under quarantine or at high risk. “Looking up” was a realisation of what was in front of us, but from it emerged a quick intimacy which, far from a soft and ephemeral idea, could form the kernel of a successful recovery - to a place that is better than the one we left behind.

Before I get too carried away, rich vibrant communities have always existed here. I have presented community radio for years and have seen the work and commitment that people pour into them. What “looking up” did was make the *value* of community abundantly clear to those who had never tuned into that frequency before. People who had been too distracted to notice. People like me.

Consider a counter-example. Before COVID, Australia had become a cynical place. In a poll taken in late 2018, found Australians’ satisfaction with the democratic process was at an all time low. And as democracy is participating in the running of community, I take this to mean our national community was in dire straits. And when the community stops working, people stop participating - they close their doors, shut their blinds and focus on distant horizons. In other words - they look away.

Even before the chickens, Chutney was a slow walker. An avid subscriber to the ‘Canine bulletin board’, every lamppost, every corner absolutely had to be sniffed. A ten minute walk alone would, when taken with Chutney, leave me with only half an hour of daily exercise time. But, if I rode hard, I could hit a bike path to the five kilometer radius and return. Through this mad dash, I discovered Darebin Creek. For years, I had lived beside it, but until lockdown never understood the liberation of being channeled along its winding path, past ancient rock faces into grassy glens that cradled the creek.

These discoveries were not mine alone. I had taken the Merri Creek trail to work. During lockdown far more people walked in the fading afternoon light chatting, unloading. Human connections were being reforged in person, relationships to green space, once perfunctory, were deepening. People were “looking up” and rediscovering relationships with one another and nature.

Then there was Northcote golf course. By the time I discovered the hole in the fence it was large enough for a man in a wheelchair to be carried through. I can remember that bright Saturday afternoon seeing the undulating hills and bunkers - repurposed to allow families and small groups of friends (five person limit observed). As I stepped through and straightened up I saw a music festival without music. This genius of reinterpretation, a vast greenspace, once a monoculture, reserved for a single activity was now busted open, reclaimed by the community with all its noise, chaos and diversity. Again we “looked up” to appreciate what was right there.

“Looking up” was not just a shift in mindset. It realigns priorities and relationships to what one lives amongst. Through it follows the most profound realisations for recovery: that the strongest communities are local and the environment is not ‘over there’ but something we inhabit.

“Looking up” empowered us with an unadulterated connection to nature and people, and reinvigorated our capacity for reinvention.

Perhaps this opportunity is fading. Today, walking Chutney, I see gazes fixed a little further, the smile of the stranger a little harder to reach for. Recovery needs us to remember what we saw when we looked up.

Melbourne was returning to work when the competition winners were announced on a fresh sheet of cardboard. Traits were scribbled below the winning names to justify the choices.

Elizabeth is “timid” and “likes being under the tree” while Gwendolin is a “boss chook” and “will eat out of your hand”. But neither knows they were my mascots for recovery.