

# 1 The Project

*I do not understand how anyone can live without one small  
place of enchantment to turn to.*

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *Cross Creek*

Do you have a place that matters to you—a specific space to which your sense of self is tied, that evokes strong emotions and meaning? Your first answer might be the name of a town, city, or state. But that is not the answer we are looking for. Rather, identify a specific place or spot in that town, city, or state that matters. What is that place—the home you grew up in, the café you go to every day to do homework, a park in which you relax, the place you worship, your grandmother’s house, or the place where you meet friends?

We understand the power of place in our lives when we realize that we are always in some specific place, headed from one specific place to another, planning to go to some specific place, and imagining what a specific place might be like. At any moment, our very being is bound to a place: “I am at a place called work,” or “I am at a place called home,” “I am on my way to a place called a church,” or “I am leaving a place called a bar.” Or “I would love to live in a place called Utopia.” It is difficult to imagine a person *not* being in some place (Gieryn 2000). In this sense, self and place are intertwined (Flunk, Pease, and Rowe 2011). In fact, people are known in large part by the places they frequent and by their level of attachment to those places (Gieryn 2000). Simply think about how you feel calmed or

angered when you learn the place someone you care about is or is about to go.

We often focus on the place that matters most to us and take for granted the surrounding neighborhood. We can think of the neighborhood as the home to the place that matters. It is the neighborhood—the residents, the vacant and occupied buildings, the streets and roads, the green space—that “hugs” the place that matters to you. The neighborhood shapes how you relate to that specific place. In fact, the neighborhood deserves your attention given that it is the backdrop to that place, as the following remarks suggest.

- “Once I get home, I just lock my door because I am afraid to go out.”
- “When I am at my local library, I feel connected to the community that supports it.”
- “The little park by the river is where I go to just watch people in the neighborhood, just relax.”
- “The boys and girls club was a place I went after school to stay out of trouble.”
- “I always go to a little nightclub to hear music. I don’t tell my parents where it is because they think the neighborhood is a dangerous place.”

#### WHAT YOU WILL DO

*Places That Matter* guides you through an action-based research experience that is launched by identifying a specific place that *matters* to your life and then asking you to get to know the neighborhood that surrounds it. That place can matter to you now or it could have mattered at a crucial time in your life, but it must be a place with a physical address (as opposed to a virtual address) that you can get to without exerting great effort, time, or expense. That place can be a school, a residence, a café, a hair salon, a bookstore, a park, a place of worship, or a community center. You must have a role that gives you a stake in the place that matters. That role may be as

- ✓ a resident;
- ✓ a member of a church, mosque, or synagogue;

- ✓ an employee (or frequent customer);
- ✓ a friend, relative (grandmother, uncle, parent), or significant other of a resident;
- ✓ a coach of a team whose home field is a park, ball field, stadium, or gym; or
- ✓ a student at a school.

Your place that matters acts as a social, emotional, and physical (as opposed to a virtual) anchor attaching your very being to the neighborhood in which you move about and otherwise live parts of your life. This action-based research project asks you to take a hard look at that neighborhood. After all, not only is the place that matters to you part of a neighborhood, but the health of that neighborhood has a direct impact on quality of life as it relates to that place. For this reason alone, the neighborhood is deserving of your interest and support.

Those who have tested this project have named their grandmother's house, a local library, a school running track, their workplace, a frequented restaurant, and their residence as the place that matters to them. Some reflections about places that matter are given below. Note the personal energy and level of investment that each writer brings to the project.

- I would have to say that the place that matters to me is my grandmother's house. Ever since my father joined the Marines when I was a baby, my family has been on the move. By the time I graduated from high school we had lived in several states and even other countries. I did not get to see my cousins, aunts, and uncles very often. The place we always met up (and still meet up) was a quaint little house at 444 Reunion Road, in Anchor, Iowa.<sup>1</sup> No matter where I was in the world, I knew I could always come "home" to visit with family, and that place remained the same in a life of constant change. Many times, where you live is not where your home is but where your heart is.
- The place that matters to me is Thai Heaven. It is a small, family-owned restaurant in Beanthread, New Jersey. The restaurant, as you can probably guess, serves authentic Thai food. I am absolutely in love with their dishes. They have a very spicy and unique flavor that leaves your

1. When the place that matters is a personal residence, I have changed the street address, city, and name to maintain confidentiality.

mouth watering just thinking about it. It is a local favorite, a hole-in-the-wall eatery that one could easily drive right by without noticing. If you were to step inside, though, you would quickly be greeted by the scent of spices, meat, and rice. The owners are two brothers. They came over to America when they were young and decided to start their own business. Their story evokes a strong patriotic feeling in me.

- An important place to me is the Public Library located at 1786 Book Pike in Peaceful, Ohio. The silence of the library brings me peace from my difficult home and school life. In this library, I become anonymous. I am no longer the girl no one talks to at school. I am simply a woman eager to learn. The people sitting next to me on their computers do not care if I sit next to them. I can look at whatever I want, learn whatever I want, and be free from the people who see me in narrow ways. No one asks me why I am there. When I was homeless for a few months, I could go into the library to drink water from the fountain. I want to know something about the neighborhood that supports this library through its tax dollars.
- There are many places in my life that matter, but the one place that matters most to me is the running track at Ikaika<sup>2</sup> High School (1515 Noa i ka<sup>3</sup> Ave.) in Mokupuni Ma, Hawaii,<sup>4</sup> where I went to high school. I still run on the track today. That six-lane track brought me smiles, laughter, tears, and pain. This place birthed my hunger for the sport of track and field. Here, I met many friends who became like family to me. The track was a place where I talked to friends, family, coaches, and spectators. This place really comes alive at night when those big stadium lights shine down, putting runners in the spotlight.
- My place that matters is a local Dairy Queen located on 3 Scoop Street in Spumoni, Indiana, where I have been working since I was sixteen. I chose this place because of how much I have learned by working there. This is the place I grew as a person. I have acquired job skills that I will take with me for the rest of my life. I learned to be responsible. I showed up for every shift and never called in sick, even in the summers when I worked six days a week. I learned how to balance my school, work, and social life. I learned how to save money from my paychecks and keep a budget. I stayed at this job because my coworkers are like a family to me. I also met my boyfriend there. We all have a close bond, and we even hang out in the store when we aren't working. People think we are crazy to spend so much time "at work." We call ourselves the "DQ Crew" and always have each other's backs.

2. *Ikaika* means "strong" in the Hawaiian language.

3. In the Hawaiian language, *Noa i ka* means "free."

4. *Mokupuni Ma* means "ocean."

**Once a place that matters is chosen, the immediate challenges become**



*Figure 1.1. The Power of Supporting Questions to Guide Thinking*

SOURCE: Joan Ferrante and Tabitha Kelly

Once the place that matters has been identified your charge is to do research that will answer two core questions:

- In what ways do you currently support, or fail to support, the neighborhood that surrounds the place that matters?
- Should your support be increased? If so, in what ways?

Now that you know the two driving questions, the challenge becomes how to begin. Typically, trying to answer the core questions generates more questions, such as those listed in Figure 1.1: What counts as the surrounding neighborhood? How do I learn about who lives there? What kind of things do I want to know about the residents? These secondary questions generate information that can help you assess the neighborhood’s

strengths and weaknesses. In turn, you will gain insights about specific areas where support is needed and where your energies might be directed.

## THE PROCESS

For now, do not worry if you are unclear about how to frame the secondary questions that will ultimately drive the research you will do to answer the core questions. This book coaches you through the question-asking and question-answering process. Each chapter is broken into a series of modules with related exercises that take between 10 and 90 minutes each to complete. There are step-by-step instructions to guide you through them and to give you experience gathering and interpreting qualitative and quantitative data.

The coaching extends to *subtle skills*—the kinds of skills that can only be taught while doing the project and learning what to do when you run into roadblocks, forks in the road, and dead ends. Subtle skills are taught when someone in the role of mentor or coach shares helpful hints, conveys rules of thumb, and alerts you to challenges that are likely to arise along the way. Each exercise has been tested to ensure that instructions are worded clearly and deliver expected results.

Each chapter concludes with coaching about how to write a 1- to 2-page section of what will eventually become part of an 8- to 10-page research brief. That brief highlights the findings about the neighborhood's needs and what you can do to address those needs. By the start of chapter 8, you will have completed a draft of the research brief. Chapter 8 coaches you through the process of consolidating the six sections created in chapters 2 through 7 into the research brief that evaluates your current level of support and recommends ways you can increase (or sustain) support for the neighborhood surrounding the place that matters. A preview of chapters 2 through 8 follows.

CHAPTER 2—LAUNCHING THE PROJECT—involves asking you to identify a specific *place that matters* to your life. The place can be a school, a residence, a café, a hair salon, a bookstore, a park, a place of worship, or

some other place. The next step is to establish the boundaries of the neighborhood that surrounds it. To facilitate the choice of a place that matters and determining neighborhood boundaries, the chapter reviews and clarifies the meanings of four important concepts: *place*, *matters*, *neighborhood*, and *support*.

CHAPTER 3—THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM—demonstrates how applying key sociological concepts and sociological perspectives allow you to see in new ways both the place that matters and the surrounding neighborhood. These concepts and perspectives give order to data collecting, observation, and analysis. As such they calm feelings of being overwhelmed and inspire secondary questions to move the project forward. There are also exercises that prompt you to use sociological concepts and perspectives to think in new ways about the neighborhood that surrounds the place that matters.

CHAPTER 4—THE RESIDENTS—places the emphasis on those who live within the boundaries of the neighborhood surrounding the place that matters. It coaches you through the process of creating social and demographic profiles of residents such as the numbers and percentages classified as a specific race, sex, age, disability, income-group, and some other social category. Social categories are treated as human-constructed divisions with real consequences. Such treatment informs the kinds of data gathered and ways of writing about the residents who make up the neighborhood. Knowing about residents' social and demographic characteristics brings to light special issues and needs within the neighborhood.

CHAPTER 5—NEIGHBORHOOD RESOURCES—directs attention to the tangible and intangible resources within the neighborhood. Tangible resources include natural resources (bodies of water, views, parks) as well as the presence or absence of businesses, service-providing institutions, public spaces, and personal resources. Intangible resources include human capital, the neighborhood's reputation, and support systems that allow residents to feel connected to and secure within the neighborhood. Documenting the tangible and intangible resources and their distribution

helps gauge the neighborhood's strengths and needs and informs the actions laid out in the research brief.

**CHAPTER 6—BASIC RESEARCH CONCEPTS**—takes you beyond the largely descriptive methods emphasized in earlier chapters and prepares you to do more complex research. The basic concepts of research covered include units of analysis, target population, sampling, variables, operational definitions, and levels of measurement. Chapter 6 coaches you on how to collect data and make observations. In the process you will establish the number and percentage of 3- to 4-year-olds enrolled in preschool, observe interaction within the neighborhood, determine the neighborhood's reputation, and much more.

**CHAPTER 7—TYPES OF INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH**—considers broad types of research (applied versus basic and qualitative versus quantitative). It also considers eight specific and overlapping methods of investigative research each of which can fall under these broad categories. Those methods, distinguished by purpose, are descriptive, interpretive, historical, comparative, correlational, multivariate, experimental, and mixed. Just knowing the many methods opens your eyes to investigative possibilities. No one method should be considered superior or inferior, as each has strengths and shortcomings. The choice of research type depends on the goals of research and the kind of data or observations needed. There are exercises that give you opportunities to practice using some of these methods. So, for example, you will learn to compare the wages of women in your neighborhood to those of men and evaluate that difference. And you will learn to connect something that occurred in the neighborhood's past with the present.

**CHAPTER 8—WRITING THE RESEARCH BRIEF**—covers how to consolidate the six sections of the research brief drafted in chapters 2 through 7. The research brief is the final product that addresses the core questions: (1) In what ways, if any, do you support the neighborhood surrounding the place that matters to you? (2) Should that support be increased? If so, in what ways? This chapter ends with two sample briefs. One brief centers on a place that matters located in an urban neighborhood undergoing



gentrification and the other focuses on a place that matters located in a rural neighborhood.

#### MEETING THE CHALLENGE

For whatever reason, most people I talk to hate the prospect of doing research because it involves negotiating, creating, accessing, and making sense of data. Doing research demands a high level of proficiency. Yet proficiency is not achieved quickly; it takes dedication, determination, practice (doing), and mindfulness. The work of negotiating difficult material is eased when there is an emotional connection to the task at hand. Identifying a place that matters and taking time to learn about the neighborhood (its residents and resources) serves as an emotional anchor that attaches you to the project and to its larger educational and applied purpose. That purpose is to recognize, appreciate, and take some action to support the surrounding neighborhood as the home to the places that matter in our lives. Even when there is an emotional bridge to ease the work of accomplishing a challenging task, it is important to know that building any kind of proficiency is a steady process that involves at least four stages.

#### *The Four Stages of Proficiency Building*

People in Stage 1 are in a state of inertia. Something must happen that motivates them to do something that shakes them from this state and launches them into Stage 2, realization (e.g., “I need to know this!”). Stage 3 is the action stage, as the once inert dedicate themselves to the task at hand. Stage 4 is one of ongoing learning and growth.

1. **Inertia**—People in this stage do not—and cannot yet—understand or anticipate all they will need to know and what they will need to do to become proficient at something. Those in the inertia stage cannot articulate how taking the time and making the effort to learn a skill puts them at an advantage. Consequently, they view learning to do research or other challenges as things they must endure. They dismiss, often with great certainty, that which they are being asked to learn, not seeing (even refusing to see) any value or usefulness.

2. **Realization**—The key to moving into Stage 2 is recognizing that lacking a needed proficiency is a problem. Typically, some critical experience jump starts that recognition. That stimulus may be a job interview in which one fails to demonstrate to a potential employer that one possesses a desired skill. When people are in the realization stage they acknowledge that they do not yet understand or know how to do something, *and* they recognize that this puts them at a disadvantage. They see the value of knowing or being able to do that which they cannot do. Armed with this newfound awareness, they are ready to move to Stage 3.
3. **Action**—At Stage 3, people become learners and take first steps toward achieving proficiency. Here the learner is ready to make a sincere effort, but that effort must be met with clear direction, feedback, and meaningful opportunities to practice. At this stage, there is self-consciousness in the effort as learners must concentrate hard to do the work to address their deficit. There are misunderstandings and misapplications, but overall those in the action stage *get it*.
4. **Growth**—Over time, as people gain more experience, the knowledge and skills that once seemed so difficult to master become second nature. Effort is paying off. The self-consciousness and doubt of Stage 3 eventually dissipate and are replaced with confidence and feelings of accomplishment.

Figure 1.2 illustrates the process of getting to Stage 4. That process can be compared to learning to drive a car. People start out by realizing it is time they learn to drive. The first few times they drive, they must think about every move. There seems to be so much to keep track of: other drivers, knowing the rules of the road, controlling the car, and so on. But after weeks or months of practice, driving becomes automatic. No longer must the new driver think about how far and in what direction to turn the steering wheel, or about how much pressure to apply to the brake. The decision to brake hard or lightly, to turn the steering wheel barely or sharply, happens without conscious effort. With practice, people learn how to drive a car. Likewise, with practice, we can achieve the skill set we are looking to achieve. I hope this book moves you through the first three stages and that at the end of the book, you *get it* and feel ready to take on other projects that will continue to cultivate the desired skills.

**Step 1: Inertia**

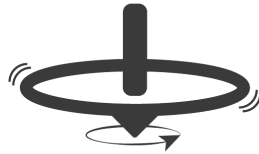
Lacks understanding or dismisses importance of a proficiency

**Step 2: Realization**

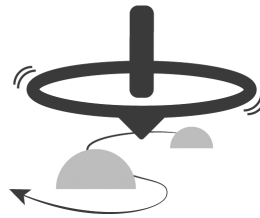
Acknowledges the need for the proficiency

**Step 3: Action**

Takes first steps toward achieving proficiency

**Step 4: Growth**

Gains experiences and moves toward full proficiency



*Figure 1.2. The Four Stages of Proficiency Building*

SOURCE: Joan Ferrante and Tabitha Kelly

## WHY CARE ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

We have already listed skills that this action-based research project will cultivate. But skill-building goals aside, why take the time to learn about the neighborhood that surrounds the place that matters to you? Why take the time to learn whether you support or fail to support that neighborhood?

Clearly people benefit when they can say that there is a place that matters to their lives—a place they spend (and have spent) meaningful time. If they treat the surrounding neighborhood and its residents as the largely unnoticed backdrops to the places they sleep, work, relax, socialize, study, and so on, then they have failed to appreciate the neighborhood as the supportive context. It is in their best interest to care. Here we can point to

the “broken window theory,” which states, “If the first broken window in a building is not repaired, then people who like breaking windows will assume that no one cares about the building and more windows will be broken. Soon the building will have no windows” (Kelling and Wilson 1982). The point is that some of the very smallest acts can affect the quality of life in a neighborhood and send powerful messages about who cares and what matters. If litter is thrown and left lying in the street or yards, if windows are broken and not repaired. If business owners don’t consider that they are trying the patience and goodwill of residents when their customers park in the spaces residents use, And if residents do not support local businesses, these acts send important messages. Just as lapses in caring send messages that affect the quality of neighborhood life, so do *considerate* and other constructive behaviors (Brotherton, French, and Pickering 2013). Those with a stake in a place that matters should feel an obligation to contribute to the quality of neighborhood life and not take it for granted. The University of Kansas Work Group for Community Health and Development (University of Kansas 2014) expresses it best: everyone in a neighborhood can be the source of some asset that benefits the space.

Everyone has some skills or talents, and everyone can provide knowledge about the [neighborhood], connections to the people they know, and the kind of support that every effort needs—making phone calls, stuffing envelopes, giving people information, moving equipment or supplies—whatever needs doing. This suggests that everyone in the [neighborhood] can be a force for community improvement if only we knew what their assets were, and could put them to use.

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