AND you thought the teenager texting madly on your train home was just bored. Seems those twitching thumbs are the drivers of a cultural shift that could reinvigorate Australia's long-lost, and much yearned for, sense of community.

Social researcher Hugh Mackay said yesterday that younger generations were herding together like never before, using new technologies such as SMS and email chatrooms to foster tight social bonds.

Having grown up knowing only "instability, uncertainty and unpredictability", Generation Y had instinctively drawn together to cope, Mr Mackay said.

"The most precious resource they have is each other. And they can't get enough of each other," Mr Mackay told the Communities in Control conference in Melbourne yesterday.

"They are the most intensely tribal, herd-based generation of young Australians I've ever known."

Mr Mackay said young people were showing the way for older Australians still struggling with the turbulence of recent economic and social change. As teens moved into adulthood and positions of influence, their skills in forging social connections would begin to change the communities that developed around their workplaces and neighbourhoods, he later told The Australian.

"Maybe partly because so many of them are the product of fractured marriages and households, it's almost as though they've created extended surrogate families," he said.

"I'm not predicting a revolution but I think it's the early sign of a genuine culture shift away from individualism to a more communitarian kind of culture."

Mr Mackay said his research consistently revealed that as households have continued to shrink, with half of the nation's homes now inhabited by just one or two people, Australians were yearning for closer community ties.

"The community is going to benefit from a herd instinct that is being frustrated in the domestic setting," he said.

While the onus remained on established groups and government organisations to help develop that feeling into real, inclusive social links, Mr Mackay said he was optimistic about the way ahead.

"I think that we have to react to this present situation and I think once we start reacting to it, that will be good news - just because there's so much yearning for it to be different.

"I regard it as a valid symptom of the desire for change."

This report appears on australianIT.com.au.