Being the Change We Want:

A Conversation about Vocational Renewal for Nonprofit Leaders

Patricia Thompson

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METCALF FOUNDATION

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Patricia Thompson

Patricia Thompson helps leaders lead. For almost twenty years, Pat worked in federal politics and for the YMCA. Since 2000, she has been a consultant to boards and chief executives of nonprofit organizations steeped in history and facing adaptive challenges. She lives in Toronto and Lakefield, ON and can be reached via www.patriciathompson.ca.

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Dear Readers,

In this day and age, you might reasonably expect that a 50-page paper would come with an executive summary for busy nonprofit leaders who suffer from information overload. This paper is different. As you will discover, this topic does not lend itself to a conventional approach. The paper's narrative structure and my conversational style also make it impossible to reduce the content to a few key points or a quick read.

The purpose of this paper is to invite you into the kind of conversation that slows us down and causes us to lose track of time. Imagine emerging from it with new insight, refreshed, percolating with possibilities, and ready to take a first step in making at least one of them a reality.

For this reason, I hope you will lose yourself in these pages, leap off a story of mine into one of your own, let an idea take hold, or wander off in a direction that interests you. This paper doesn't have to be read in one sitting. In fact, you'll likely find it easier to digest in smaller portions and over time. Come back to it when you can and when you're ready for a change from what you have to read each day.

In writing a paper like this one, I'm inviting you to give more of your time and more of yourself than you might usually give over to the discourse on nonprofit leadership. I do this in the hope that you will take away something more than the usual fare of facts, theories or frameworks. What that might be – and what you might do with it – is entirely up to you.

Sincerely,

Patricia Thompson
Toronto, May 2009

Introduction

In our urgency to renew organizational and civic life, have we been neglecting the person who leads and her or his own renewal challenges?

This question arises from the evidence that nonprofit leaders are buckling under the weight of their work and its excessive demands.[1] More of us appear to be tuning out, opting out or burning out. Even more disconcerting are the trends that indicate fewer young people are seeking paid employment in the nonprofit sector given what they see as its high costs and limited rewards.[2] While we know what causes nonprofit leaders to give up, we know very little about what sustains their commitment and effort.

As a Metcalf Innovation Fellow, I have stepped into this gap to examine the difference that reflective practice might make. Reflective practice is the "active process of witnessing and examining our lived experience for the purpose of learning from our work and lives."[3] Using questions, stories and dialogue, it draws our fears and hopes out of the shadows to confront cynicism and apathy, overcome isolation, build trust, and increase courage. In this way, it gets at the undercurrents of our work that can lift us up or drag us down.

I have also put two concepts – vocation and renewal – under a magnifying glass to see what they might contribute to our understanding. By vocation, I mean the work we feel passionate about and uniquely equipped to do. I think of renewal as both a process (a movement through stages, seasons or cycles) and an outcome (a changed state.) Put together, vocational renewal describes the continuous process of connecting and reconnecting who we are with what we do. It is focused on the outcomes of greater maturity, vitality and effectiveness in our leadership roles.[4]

My sights are now set on one thing that we can do differently to keep this connection and realize these outcomes: we can reflect more intentionally on the leaders we are and hope to be. We can do this in conversation with ourselves and others who share our commitment to making a difference in the world through our work. It involves taking turns telling our stories, asking good questions, imagining alternatives to the status quo, and discerning a way forward. I invite you to join me in doing this one thing to see what benefits we might derive for ourselves, our organizations and our causes.[5]

My assumption is that the insight we seek into the trends and the process of vocational renewal will be found in this conversation and not necessarily in this paper. It is, therefore, a conversation starter. Read on and you will discover that I do not posit a unified theory. I meander from one idea or story to the next

without fully answering questions or tying up loose threads – just as a good conversation might. I break with the formal academic style of writing and critical analysis that I was taught in university. Instead, I speak for myself and about myself in the hope that you will do the same. This narrative approach has been difficult and uncomfortable at times. I chose it to see what I might learn from heading out in a direction without a map, schedule or fixed destination.

After all, Metcalf Innovation Fellowships set recipients down in uncharted territory.[6] They provide an unparalleled opportunity to break free of the usual constraints to look at the root causes of seemingly intractable social issues, and to investigate "powerful ideas, models and practices that have the potential to lead transformational change." The fellowship is a flexible initiative that does not prescribe a course of action but holds firm to a vision of "a reflective, diverse community sector capable of responding to our complex social challenges." True to its word, the Foundation has encouraged me to find my own way into issues related to vocational renewal. It has also actively supported this inquiry by helping me connect with a cross-section of nonprofit leaders – one-on-one and in small groups. (On page 34, you will find a "postscript" which shares some of the discussion that an earlier version of this paper has started.)

The Metcalf Foundation's interest in renewal is not limited to my fellowship. In fact, renewal is a theme that runs through its arts, environment and community programs. Metcalf Renewal Fellowships, in particular, make it possible for mid-career senior leaders to take three to twelve months away from their workplaces for rest and revitalization. Early in this work, I had the opportunity to eavesdrop on a conversation that the Foundation staff had with three recipients of this fellowship and two members of the program's advisory committee. Their stories gave me some of my initial insights into the power of a narrative approach. I thank these Renewal Fellows for their candour and commitment to "being the change we want."[7]

I am indebted to the Board of the Metcalf Foundation for the chance to do this work. The Foundation's President, Sandy Houston, and program directors Michael Jones (arts), Colette Murphy (community), and Ruth Richardson (environment) are an exceptionally vital group of thinker-doers. As collaborators, I could not have found better.

As you might imagine, there is a story behind the theme of this conversation: *Being the Change We Want*. It was inspired by one of the first national public dialogue processes, *The Society We Want*, designed by one of Canada's leading social innovation strategists Eric Young. Back in the 90s, it was a pilot program of the two-year old Canadian Public Research Network (CPRN) headed then by economist Judith Maxwell.[8]

My own involvement in the CPRN project was marginal, but the name left quite an impression on me. I liked how it precisely stated the purpose of the

conversation and located responsibility for it with those who would benefit directly. At the time, I was participating in a two-year national, inter-sectoral roundtable on the future of leadership and governance and had just been introduced to the "magic of dialogue" by American pollster and political commentator Daniel Yankelovich. I was an instant convert. CPRN's more thoughtful, deliberative and citizen-focused approach to developing public policy struck me as a promising way forward.

What I have learned through the practice of dialogue since then leads me to connect two powerful statements of intent: *the society we want* and *being the change we want*. Without space for conversation about the leaders we are, the society we want is likely to remain the stuff of flip charts, position papers and reports. The time has come to take a serious look at the issues related to vocational renewal at the intersection where our visions and realities meet.

The Conversation

Be the change you want to see in the world.

These words attributed to Mahatma Gandhi have been with me for as long as I can remember.[9] As a teenager, I carried them around in a handmade book of quotations. Much later, I pinned them up on bulletin boards in my offices, passed them along through greeting cards, and wore them on t-shirts – as if the reading, sharing and wearing would somehow painlessly transform me into a leader who could change the world.

In reality, I am the one who has been changed by more than 25 years of community work in urban settings and at the local, national and international levels of organizational life. Active engagement with tough issues (equity, inclusion, globalization,) these times (the first decade of a new century) and this place (the Greater Toronto Area in all its diversity) continue to forge a tight connection between who I am and what I do – the worker and her work. Through it all, I have learned that knowing the truth is not the same as possessing it through lived experience, and that proclaiming the truth is not the same as professing it through stories.

My leadership story is coloured by my gender (I am a woman) and my age (I was born at the tail end of the baby boom.) It also reflects my social location (from middle class stock and among the first in my family to graduate from university) and my ethnicity (third generation Canadian of Anglo-Saxon ancestry.) My ideals were seeded in a small town and watered by early experiences with different cultures and faith traditions in peace and justice work in southern Ontario and overseas. Along the way, I was challenged by the example set by a community-minded mother, farsighted peers and patient mentors to frame my life around the goal of making a difference. They also helped me see that my contribution would be shaped by my natural abilities and choices, not only my inheritance and circumstances.

Eye-opening and heart-breaking experiences inside and outside the formal classroom took me into employment in federal politics and later in the YMCA movement – now a venerable international institution dedicated "to the growth of persons in spirit, mind and body and in a sense of responsibility to each other and the global community." For much of my working life, its mission has been my cause.

In the mid-90s, my leadership path took an unexpected turn. I became aware that I had drifted far from the vision that had lured me into nonprofit, social

change-oriented work as a young person. I turned inward to rekindle a waning sense of purpose. In the process, I became intensely interested in the patterns of renewal that I was witnessing in my own life and all around me. My guide through this transition time was American educator, community organizer and author Parker J. Palmer.

Palmer's ideas about vocational renewal were first introduced to me years earlier at a North American conference on community development by a team known for its organizing work with youth on university campuses. At that time, I was several years into a job that I loved when I found my way into their workshop called *Leading from Within*. It stood out on a long list of more predictable fare related to sharing program models and acquiring technical skills. My curiousity was piqued by the invitation to have a conversation with myself and others about the leaders we were becoming – to "down tools" as an alternative to "tooling up."

Back then, I was barely conscious of my restlessness. I preferred to ignore the evidence of a widening divide between who I was and what I assumed was expected of me as a leader. I was in the thrall of my organization's ideals but reluctant to look too closely at how I might have to change to breathe more life into them. Barely into my thirties, I wasn't even close to burning out. I was simply ready for a new challenge and anxious about what that might mean.

An hour-and-a-half in a circle with 20 people, two facilitators, a short excerpt from a book by Parker Palmer, and permission to listen deeply gave me what I needed.[10] A small investment of time and attention helped to reset my compass and put me back on the path with a renewed sense of confidence, purpose and understanding of my vocation. Paradoxically, the conversation planted my feet more firmly in reality at the same time that it stoked my idealism. It helped me tap into hope and courage – two renewable resources that make continuing on a leadership path possible. It also helped me make a bold decision to move from the staff side to the line side of the org chart, and from the national to the local arena – closer to the action, I hoped.

Five years later, I returned to a national role with more of an epic than a story. The themes of disengagement, disorientation, and disenchantment run through this textbook transition tale of inevitable endings, neutral zones and new beginnings.[11] My version also includes the experience of dislocation because I had uprooted myself and moved across the country. This story has complicated characters, a plot that twists and turns unexpectedly through several chapters, and lots of tension, pathos and even a few morals. None of the details are important. What matters are the multiple meanings that I derived from the story and how they formed – or deformed – my vocational identity and sense of purpose.

When I left this local role, I was exhausted and confused. This is not to say that accepting the job had been a mistake. On the contrary. I'm told that the finest steel is forged in the hottest ovens. If so, I owe the clarity and strength of my vocation today to this time in my career. The experience continues to be one of my best teachers and prepared me in surprising ways for the work that I'm doing now.

Initially, I had no idea what to do with the experience. I quickly discovered that there is little if any dedicated space in Canada for peer-led conversation about vocation, for making meaning or sense of lived experience, and for placing it within a larger context – connecting vocational renewal and the renewal of organizational and civic life. Currently, we carve out this kind of reflective space on the margins of our work: during coffee and meal breaks at conferences or workshops, at the end of a long day when we can put our feet up on our desks with a trusted co-worker, rare encounters with a mentor, in fleeting moments of solitude in transit, or at the start of another day.

"We live, by and large, in a culture that divorces contemplation from action … Those who spring into action rarely find time for contemplation, for standing still – except on vacation when they collapse from overwork," says Frances Westley and her colleagues Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Quinn Patten in *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*.[12] They devote an entire chapter of their book on the role "standing still" plays in the social innovation process. But how might the world change if we stood still to locate *ourselves* in this process?

That is what I hoped to learn when I moved out of my national role and into a time of discernment which involved reading and talking about vocation, intentional loitering in theology classes, consulting for mostly old organizations facing adaptive challenges, and trying new practices like seasonal retreats. By working outside the structures and routines of organizational life, I took a circuitous route into a much greater awareness of my vocational identity.

Up to that point, my vocation had been frustratingly elusive and defied description. Belonging to a distinct professional group like teachers, farmers or doctors seemed from a distance to be the smarter choice. But still I gravitated to work that was not widely understood or reduced to a single skill set. In my years with the YMCA, my relatives had difficulty imagining what I did for a living if I wasn't a fitness instructor, camp counselor or towel attendant.

After leaving, a former colleague helped me see that I quite naturally performed the same functions for the organization that the African griotte performs for her tribe: diplomat, storyteller, historian, ritual and record-keeper, strategist in war and peace. Griottes are counselors of chiefs and spiritual leaders. They are "time-binders" who give new meaning to old words, crafting and using stories to exhort people to action. In short, they help leaders lead.[13]

For a long time, I had also quietly identified with the role midwives play in bringing new life into the world. Instinctively, I know what to do when "the earth is hunched in a tight ball / its shoulders aching with fatigue / its belly burning with the fires of creation."[14] I know myself to be a developer who tends the seeds of new ideas, not an operator who oversees and brings the harvest in season after season. I do my best work with individuals and groups who are in the painful but promising place between endings and beginnings.

Griotte and midwife are not exactly professions that I can put on a passport application or a business card, but they are roles that have enabled me to recognize what Palmer calls my "birthright gifts" and claim my vocational identity. He says that "we arrive in this world with birthright gifts — then we spend the first half of our lives abandoning them or letting others disabuse us of them ... Then — if we are awake, aware, and able to admit our loss — we spend the second half trying to recover and reclaim the gift we once possessed."[15]

Some nonprofit leaders have told me that they had to burn out completely before they could begin this process. Others have stories of an unexpected and abrupt disruption: job loss, illness, the end of a significant relationship. Still others like me describe a slow, gradual awakening into an awareness that the life they were living was divided and unsustainable.

Our lives become divided when "we make our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when survival does not absolutely demand it, or when we remain in settings or relationships that steadily kill off our spirit; when we hide our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict, challenge and change, or when we conceal our true identities for fear of being criticized, shunned, or attacked."[16]

I stayed for too long in a role and setting that steadily killed off my spirit and kept features of my vocational identity concealed – even from me. This decision affected colleagues and contributed to a divided workplace. To close these divides, I had to do more than quit my job and find another. I had to let go of work that belonged to others and reclaim what was legitmately mine: the work at the core of my vocation.

I also had to take a closer look at my "vocational location." Where did I belong? Behind the scenes or at the frontline? Inside, outside or on the edges of organizational life? In the nonprofit, private or public sector, or in the cracks between them? Spanning local, regional, national and global arenas or drilling down into one of them? Where and under what conditions would my best work take root?

I now think of this process of asking big questions and listening for answers as vocational renewal. What I know now from the experience can be stated as three convictions.

My first conviction is that there is at least one vocation located within each of us and fed by circumstances, conditions and choices. It wears the uniform of different professions, and assumes different jobs and job titles. Nonetheless, it is a constant throughout our lives. Poet William Stafford calls it the thread we follow that goes among things that change.[17] Theologian Frederick Buechner says it is the place where our deep gladness and the world's great hunger meet.[18] We know it by the satisfaction we feel when we're doing this work and the quality of our results. Our communities, however we define them, are often the first to notice and name our "deep gladness," and to tap it for the good of the whole.

My second conviction is that our vocations are discovered, not acquired like diplomas, certifications and degrees. They can also be recovered when circumstances cause us to forget or lose touch with this dimension of ourselves. However, there are no guarantees. Self-knowledge often comes as a gift when the time and conditions are right. It can evade detection if we are not open and able to let go of what Trappist monk Thomas Merton calls "our fixation on our self-willed identity."[19]

My third conviction is that those who make meaning of their lived experience and continuously renew their vocational identity are better equipped to lead change in organizations and society. I believe that this is something that we do alone and together to become more trustworthy, confident and effective leaders in the "blizzard of modern life."

When I first read Parker Palmer's description of modern life as a blizzard, I recall being overcome with relief that I was not the only one who was experiencing strong winds, limited visibility and frigid temperatures at the frontlines of community work. But he didn't leave me there in a lament for better weather. He offered the image of the midwestern farmer who runs a rope from the back doorknob of the house to the barn at the first sign of a blizzard. That rope makes it possible to go out into the storm and to return home safely, he explained. The fibres of personal and vocational identity are twisted, braided and then knotted in such a way as to anchor and guide each of us through daily work in adverse conditions.

Then it dawned on me. At the height of the blizzard, I had let go of the rope. No wonder I felt disoriented and lost. That is when I knew what I had to do if I wanted to lead anyone – let alone myself – in a new direction. I made my way to the rope. When it was securely refastened to a stable structure, I set out again.

The blizzard continues to rage around us and inside us. Economic turmoil. Environmental threats. Social strains. Fear. Mistrust. Anger. Eric Young has helped me understand what's going on. "We are at an inflection point … something is in collapse," he explains. "We not only have a moral imperative but a pragmatic imperative to reorder the way society works. We all want to have

our talents engaged, to have rich connective tissue with others, and meaning in our lives. But a very important piece of this is that, as John McKnight says, communities are made up of citizens, not of saints. We must build out of what we are – not some imagined ideal."[20] I suspect that I was working with an imagined ideal before realizing that my unvarnished self was better building material. However, I did not come to this realization until I made room for reflection.

This is why I'm inviting you to help carve out explicit space to reflect on who we are and what we do as nonprofit leaders. No special resources or expertise are required. Stories and questions are at the centre of the conversation, not the latest leadership theory.

One of the stories is about a generation of American public school teachers who have been renewing their passion for teaching through reflective practice over the past decade. Simultaneously, they have begun to reform the beleaguered education system from the inside out. In the next section, I tell their story in some detail because it has helped me see what's possible when a professional group makes vocational renewal an explicit goal.

Not surprisingly, teachers and teacher educators made it a priority to document, evaluate and share their experience. They invited people to learn alongside them and to take our learnings into our own professional contexts. In the process, I discovered that "teaching" and "leading" are virtually identical actions when performed well. It also occurred to me that I know many nonprofit leaders who are actually teachers at heart. Their vocational location is the public arena; their classroom is the community. They share with teachers an essential idealism and a fierce practicality. I suspect that nonprofit leaders and teachers would say that they spend much of their days managing the minutae, not leading the way. Their impact, nonetheless, reveals that they do both even if they do it unconsciously or badly. I found it interesting that teachers who stepped out of the classroom to attend to their sense of purpose couldn't help but teach the rest of us while they did it. Now I wonder how nonprofit leaders might lead others by making the same move.

Skip ahead and you'll find valuable research on reflective practice as a form of professional development, punctuated by my own experience with the approach modeled by Parker Palmer and his colleagues. For those who are curious about the value and impact of renewal work, this story sets up a good discussion of a real initiative by real people to address a real need. To see what might be relevant and useful to the nonprofit sector, I give a lot of attention to their core concepts and practices, and very little to the packaging and delivery of their program.

The main assumption underlying this paper's invitation is that you come to this conversation with at least one vocation (even if you cannot precisely

articulate what it is) and a worthy cause (even if your initial enthusiasm for it has been dampened over the years.) I also assume that you might even identify with a social movement – the courageous citizens who gave us public education, health care, pensions, clean water, freedom of creative expression, and even the right to a two-day break from labour known as the weekend.

I make no assumptions about where you are, have been or are headed with your work. You may be just starting out, rounding the bend to midlife or looking ahead to retirement. If you suspect that there is more to leadership development than attending training events and reading books, then this conversation is for you. It is for those who have experienced or witnessed the hardship and harm inflicted by burnout, role mismatches, and excess speed, and wonder about the systemic roots of these problems. It is for anyone who is looking for company in the place between the way things are and the way things could or should be – in their work and workplaces. I'm referring to the realistic place (albeit "tragic gap") between "corrosive cynicism and irrelevant idealism."[21]

This conversation is taking place on what poet Marge Piercy calls the "low road," the place where we first become aware that the world needs changing and where social movements are born.[22] On this road, we come to know what outrages, comforts, occupies and feeds us – what matters to us and calls us to action. We come to know ourselves as people possessed by a passion. And it is the road to which we return when we need to rest from labour, remember who we are, and renew our commitment to be the change we want to see in the world.

The Story

Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.

This story begins with this radical claim and a memo. It was written in 1991 by Parker Palmer to the foundation head who would invest three years later in a two-year pilot program of quarterly retreats for the vocational renewal of public school educators. Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique, wrote Palmer. It comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.

This clear and unequivocal statement resonated with Robert Lehman of the Fetzer Institute who turned the memo into an occasional paper called *Reflections on a Program for the Formation of Teachers*. The paper is an extension of Palmer's worldview: that all human activity emerges from our inwardness, that our outward work in the world is a projection of our inner condition; how well we know and understand ourselves is the basis for how we do our work and relate to others. Therefore, his paper includes an analysis of the inward factors such as fear that affect a teacher's capacity to teach well.[23]

Palmer describes his agenda as strengthening teaching and learning through discussion about "inner life issues" and "the person in the profession." In secular settings, he talks about the core dimensions, identity and integrity, or conscience of the professional. However, he prefers to speak of these dimensions in the language of his faith tradition, Quakerism, and to encourage others to use language that holds meaning for them.

Over a ten-year period, Palmer and his colleagues created the *Courage to Teach*© program to explore "the heart of the teacher." They use evocative questions, silence, personal stories, reflections on classroom practice, and insights from poets, storytellers, and various wisdom traditions. The program brings 20 – 30 educators together for three days quarterly for a year. With two trained facilitators, they work in large and small circles as well as on their own in a beautiful natural setting. Every part of the program is voluntary and guided by a set of boundary markers to create a safe and trustworthy space for vocational renewal.

Early on, people in other professions also expressed interest in these "formation retreats." In contrast to a skill-building approach, a formation approach asks questions about identity and motivation. It acknowledges anger and cynicism, dissipates fear, and generates hope and courage. It aims to strengthen convictions through reflection and practice. It seeks clarity,

congruence and authenticity – greater alignment between individual, community or organization, and mission.

Rick and Marcy Jackson, co-directors of the Center for Courage and Renewal, describe formation work this way.[24] It is:

- not *team building*, though with time and trust a strong sense of community naturally emerges
- not *therapy*, though this approach results in greater self-awareness and self-acceptance for participants
- not *diversity work*, yet greater understanding of "otherness" in all its manifestations and a deeper appreciation of the richness of differences are experienced
- not *creativity training*, though imagination is released when individuals begin to claim their vocational identity and strengths, and act on what brings them greatest satisfaction
- not *leadership training* per se, yet by offering multiple invitations and experiences for people to "author" their own experience they begin to take greater responsibility and leadership in their lives and work
- neither *"sage on the stage"* (expert-driven) nor *"guide on the side"* (facilitator-driven), but rather something altogether different — a kind of "being" and "leading" that emerges from the inside out (leader-driven)

Evaluations reveal that teachers who have completed the program feel rejuvenated and find their passion for teaching renewed. They undertake new leadership roles, and often give credit to the program for enhanced leadership skills and readiness to assume new challenges. They initiate more collegial relationships. They feel more reflective in their professional and personal lives. Even though changing classroom practice is not the focus of the program, participants have also reported that they believe their teaching has improved to the benefit of their students.[25]

These evaluations provide clues to the multiple benefits and outcomes of vocational renewal work. In fact, it was an article published in *The Educational Forum* in Fall 2006 that persuaded me to look more closely at reflective practice as a form of professional development for nonprofit leaders – and to "go public" with my own experience.[26] The article, "The Person in the Profession: Renewing Teacher Vitality through Professional Development," got me thinking more deeply about the many similarities between "leading" and "teaching." Its authors, Sam Intrator and Robert Kunzman, are evaluators and teacher educators. They argue that "potent teaching" – the kind that energizes and inspires students – cannot be reduced to a curriculum or method. It has something to do with "vocational vitality."

A teacher's vocational vitality is "the capacity to be vital, present, and deeply connected to his or her students," they say. It is not "a fixed, indelible condition, but a state that ebbs and flows with the context and challenges of the teaching life." The authors go on to explain that individuals who exhibit vocational vitality are engrossed in their roles, channeling energy into the physical, cognitive, and emotional labours related to their work. They are tuned in, highly sensitive to the needs of students and context. And they are purposeful, taking initiative in improving current conditions, responding to adversity, and viewing themselves as agents capable of challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting.

To understand the "contours of vitality," Intrator and Kunzman consider the opposite condition which has been researched more extensively. "If vitality is the capacity to live, grow, or develop, then its vocational contrast would be the condition of burnout … described as the progressive loss of idealism, energy, and purpose experienced by people in the helping professions as a result of the conditions of work." Their definition also includes "the loss of empathy, the increase of cynicism, and the tendency of once-caring professionals to blame clients or students for the problems."

Given the tight connection between the quality of teaching and student success, they wonder why researchers have largely neglected the qualities and conditions that contribute to vocational vitality, and conclude that this dimension of the teaching life has long been viewed as private. They discovered that resilience and vitality have been understood as matters of character and personal virtue, not the result of certain types of experiences, and much more difficult to measure than technical skill development. With limited time and resources for professional development, exploring the outer edges of personal and professional has simply not been a high priority.

But teachers know what it feels like to be disengaged from their work and not fully present during the school day, according to Intrator and Kunzman. "Rhythm and purpose are elusive; everything feels detached and methodical; obstacles seem insurmountable. This weariness of spirit makes it impossible to teach well."

Teacher renewal work, therefore, is a response to this weariness or what the authors call "this disjunction between original ideals and current realities." They argue that "renewal is more than just replenishment of inner reserves and outward energy." They think this common notion of refilling misses a central point. "What teachers need is not simply a refill of energy and vigor, but careful exploration of the question: How should I allocate my energy in ways that are consistent with the deepest values I have about myself as a teacher and a person?"

Proponents of teacher renewal work are concerned with authenticity over image and prevention over cure: the negotiation of personal identity and purpose within the shifting demands of student needs, policy and reform agendas. They remind us that teachers need the opportunity to pursue and reflect on their own growth, and to continually re-integrate their sense of purpose and calling within the context of their schools and work.

Intrator and Kunzman emphasize that renewal work accepts that disillusionment is inevitable in the teaching life. This disillusionment can turn to depression and burnout, but not always. "Disillusionment is not inherently bad. Dismantling illusion is necessary. It provides the opportunity to face and absorb a greater portion of reality – a foundation for wisdom and maturity. Only when teachers feel helplessly reactive – unable to creatively and energetically negotiate the divide between vision and reality – does disillusionment slide into burnout and ineffectiveness," they explain.

The authors conclude that teachers who work in isolation, who experience unrelenting pressure, and who receive only limited training around the technical dimensions of teaching will not retain what it takes to be their best and do their most inspired work. Teacher renewal programming provides teachers with a way to explore this neglected dimension of their professional lives – both for their own benefit and ultimately their students'.

The evidence is getting stronger that programming explicitly devoted to nourishing the inner life or core dimension of teachers, like the *Courage to Teach* program, is increasingly important. Further, it is suggested that this kind of experience is the missing link in ongoing efforts to achieve genuine educational reform. Intrator and Kunzman note that many programs are trying to effect change in institutions and systems from the outside in, but this is one of very few that is working from the inside out.

In this way, the *Courage to Teach* program and others like it fit into what Palmer calls "a movement model of social change." He explains that this model begins with individuals making a decision to live with greater integrity and results in incremental institutional change driven by communities that form around core values. It also suggests that powerful ideas that are articulated well and embodied with discipline over time can develop lives of their own. They multiply in ways that cannot be predicted nor controlled, he says. Palmer observes that a movement is most likely to succeed when it pays attention to both the microcosm and the macrocosm — cultivating individuals and small-scale communities who can make a difference in local settings, and larger-scale conversations that help people find the language and authority for advocating for change.[27]

Palmer and his collaborators describe their work in support of building movements as "courage work" – work that cultivates a powerful combination of

trust and boldness within individuals and communities. He says that, in the words of poet Adrienne Rich, "a wild patience has taken us this far" and cautions that this work cannot be expanded by speeding up the assembly line. It can only be grown organically. They think of themselves as gardeners, not manufacturers, who are pursuing a more sustainable pace and way of working, learning and leading.

When I first encountered the *Courage to Teach* program, I was all out of courage and running low on hope. What I really needed (but didn't know it at the time) was some breathing space. For four years, I had been leading a painful re-structuring effort to bring four distinct operational units into one division. The employees of one of those units decided to unionize in response to the changes. We spent a full year hammering out our first collective agreement. In parallel, we were aggressively pursuing ambitious participant and financial growth targets. This involved opening a new program centre, re-negotiating or pitching several large government contracts, and mounting our first-ever annual giving campaign in addition to everyday operational challenges. The physical, intellectual and emotional demands of this work and workplace were unlike any I had ever known before. In my off hours, I devoured the latest management books and signed up for every skill-building workshop that I could find. I figured that if I 'tooled up' I would be able to fix everything that was broken.

Although I am not a teacher, I connected easily with their sense of vocation and their need for renewal. I identified with *Courage to Teach* participants' desire to make a difference in the lives of young people. Even more, I identified with their struggles: the multiple demands, the fear of failure, the weariness, the loss of idealism and empathy, the increase of skepticism and cynicism, the loneliness. I knew these feelings. This program and those for different professions such as *Courage to Lead*© and *Circles of Trust*© were all about airing them, finding their source, and letting them lead me to greater self-knowledge and a renewed sense of purpose.

It was also about changing the one variable that I could change in the complicated equation that my work had become: me. Would 'laying tools down' instead of 'tooling up' make my work for social change more effective? Would making space and time for reflecting on my experience and listening to others increase my capacity to lead? Participants in this program and its evaluators said that it would. Many years later, I can testify that it did.

While this particular vocational renewal program has had a significant impact on me, it is not for everyone. It is only one of many tools and pathways. A recent scan of programs in Canada and the United States revealed more than 40 programs that name renewal as an objective.[28] This number does not include the many thousands of opportunities for leadership learning that indirectly refresh or renew the individual and their sense of vocation.

I hesitate, however, to rush to solutions when many of us have not even considered the possibility of a link between vocational, organizational and civic renewal. Until we do, I suspect that we will keep wringing our hands about the leadership deficit, pouring resources into remedial and technical fixes, and using up and throwing out good people. I'm interested in tilling this hard, cold soil so that innovative and promising solutions have a hospitable environment in which to grow.

Is there a connection between vocational, organizational and civic renewal?

Is vocational renewal a missing link in our strategies to release latent organizational and community capacity?

Can the concepts and practices demonstrated by the *Courage to Teach* program give shape to a range of informal and formal approaches to vocational renewal for nonprofit leaders?

Before we even attempt to answer these questions, let's look more closely at the four big ideas that ran through this story: vocation, renewal, narrative and reflection.

The Ideas

Vocation

In 2001, Toronto's first Poet Laureate Dennis Lee spoke at Ryerson University's convocation. "I'm haunted," he said "by the sense that my words today are meant for a single person among the graduating class. I don't know who you are, and I don't know where you are sitting. But you know … What I'm certain of is this. You are harbouring a hunch that you need to honour, a live possibility that has your name on it. I don't know what it is. But even more to the point: so far, neither do you."

Lee was speaking that day to graduates of every age. Twentysomethings whose options seem limitless. Thirtysomethings who are narrowing their interests, getting focused and closing doors. Forty and fiftysomethings who are more aware that what they're doing is who they are. Sixty, seventy, eighty and ninetysomethings who are wondering what's next.[29] His speech was about how they tune into their vocations. Not to their careers, professions, occupations or jobs, but to their deep interests, passions, distinctive qualities, strengths, and aptitudes – their sense of purpose. It was about the internal tensions related to that purpose that are common to every age and stage.

The word vocation comes from the Latin "vocare," meaning to call. Over past centuries, an individual who joined a religious order was said to have a vocation or calling. Harvard Business School psychologists Timothy Butler and James Waldroop are among those who have reframed this concept for our more secular times. "There are three words that tend to be used interchangeably – and shouldn't be," they write. "They are vocation, career and job. Vocation is the most profound of the three, and it has to do with your calling. It's what you're doing in your life that makes a difference for you, that builds meaning for you, that you can look back on in your later years to see the impact you've made on the world." They argue that we each develop "a unique signature of life interests." It is a pattern that doesn't change even as we mature, change roles, and take on new jobs.[30]

The poet and academics agree. A vocation or calling is something you have to listen for. "You don't hear it once and then immediately recognize it. You've got to attune yourself to the message." This is the work of our intuitive faculty which is as real as sight or hearing even though it operates largely outside our conscious control. It performs best in silence and operates at a slower pace than our other senses. It cannot be turned on or off. It reveals itself as a nudge at the edge of our consciousness.

We live in an impatient time. We want answers, not signs, clues or hunches. We want to decide, not wait until we know. Even before we get out of high school, we are expected to decide what kind of education or training we want, what work we want to do, and how much money we want to make. These are not the kinds of questions that help us tune into the stirrings of vocation. More often than not, they drown out the sound of our own voice, passions and hopes.

Leadership theorist Margaret Wheatley has written about her vocation in an essay that takes the form of a conversation with her favourite T.S. Eliot poem. She writes "we so want to know our purpose that we too quickly determine what we think it is, and we kill ourselves in the process," turning from stillness and listening to earnest action. Can we let our questions lead us into the "presence of our purpose without ever expecting a straightforward answer?"[31]

Physician and humanitarian activist James Orbinski also focuses on questions. He talks about living them. "To enter into what draws you, what calls you, is to live your question … I have always been fascinated with science, particularly with the methodology of science, and what this means in terms of action – what you can do with what you know. My questions have really come out of these loves and I've been drawn to what is classically defined as humanitarian medicine, humanitarian work."[32]

Someone recently told me that his vocation has been revealed to him in a million different, intensely personal moments over the course of his life so far. He has no need to put it into words or on a mantle for all to see, but he knows it exists and that it animates his life. Its discovery and rediscovery are mysterious processes that are impossible to reduce to a recipe, formula or model.

All I know for sure is that vocation is a gift. Something unearned. Something that has even more meaning and value when it is shared with others. Something experienced through making and keeping commitments. Something known through action and reflection. Something that can be counted on through the changing seasons of our lives. As Wheatley writes: "I know we each have a unique contribution that is necessary for the whole of us to thrive. I know our gifts are required. I don't know where these gifts originate, but I know what they feel like. I feel joyful when I yield to their expression."

Renewal

Renewal springs from the freshness and vitality of individual men and women. American civic leader John Gardner states this fact in his 1963 classic, *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society*. "Only the blind and complacent could fail to recognize the great tasks of renewal facing us – in government, in education, in urban redevelopment, in international affairs, and

most of all in our own minds and hearts."[33] By renewal, he means the continuous process of making old things new and relevant again.

Gardner's ideas interest me because he forged them in the centre of the public arena, not on the sidelines. He is a reflective practitioner. He helps me think about renewal as something more than the result of a good night's sleep or a vacation, and something less than a clean, blank slate with no relationship to the past. What he has to say about meaning, purpose and commitment has led me to take a closer look at the space between individuals and organizations, and to reflect on what renewal might look like in this space.

Gardner says that meaning, purpose and commitment are inseparable. "When one succeeds in the search for identity one has found the answer not only to the question 'Who am I?' but to a lot of other questions too: 'What must I live up to? What are my obligations? 'To what must I commit myself?'" These questions go to the heart of vocation – the part of an individual's identity that finds expression in work and can latch onto the purpose, mission and vision of a group, organization or institution in the public, private or nonprofit sectors. In turn, civic life is infused by the energy generated by individual and collective commitments.

"If a society hopes to achieve renewal, it will have to be a hospitable environment for creative men and women. It will also have to produce men and women with the capacity for self-renewal ... We know that they need not fall into a stupor of mind and spirit by the time they are middle-aged. They need not relinquish as early as they do the resilience of youth and the capacity to learn and grow. Self-renewal is possible," Gardner insists. I would put it this way: that social transformation is not possible without personal transformation. The renewal of the 'vocation within the self' or the 'profession within the person' is an essential part of this process.

Renewal is also one of those problematic words that suggest both a process (of varying length) and an outcome (or changed state.) There are those who think the renewal process is about recovering or restoring something that has been lost or forgotten. The term also refers to the work of replenishing an empty vessel or getting a stopped clock ticking again. Increasingly, it is being used as a synonym for transformation. "Renewal should not simply be a refilling, a replacing of what was lost, but rather a generative process that provides new insight, maturing perspective, and avenues for growth that are responsible to the changing needs of the person within the profession. To the extent that renewal is like the phoenix rising from the ashes, it entails a different bird emerging each time," write Sam Intrator and Robert Kunzman.[34]

From any perspective, renewal involves challenge and risk. The beginning of the process is sometimes marked by a crisis or dramatic change that destabilizes an otherwise stable state and tests vocational commitments.[35] Crises can sever

the connection between who we are and what we do. Getting reconnected is part of renewal work.

Former US Presidential candidate Al Gore spoke candidly about this work in his 2007 Nobel Peace Prize lecture. He told the story of receiving "a judgment that seemed [to him] harsh and mistaken – if not premature" seven years earlier. "But that unwelcome verdict also brought a precious if painful gift: an opportunity to search for fresh new ways to serve my purpose. Unexpectedly, that quest has brought me here," he explained.[36] While not every vocational renewal process ends in a Nobel Prize, many end with feelings of restoration, reclamation and revitalization. We are simultaneously old and new. We are renewed.

Narrative

"We live in stories the way fish live in water," writes literature professor Daniel Taylor in a book called *Tell Me a Story: The Life-Shaping Power of Our Stories*. He goes on to say that, like fish in water, we breathe stories in and out. We are buoyed and fed by them, but rarely are we conscious of this element in which we exist.[37]

I know what he means. I grew up in a storytelling family and worked for a long time with people who know how to harness the power of narrative. We told each other stories about what it was like in the past, what was different today and what we hoped for. We loved to recall embarrassing moments and times of triumph – and the personalities behind them. We never grew tired of the stories that revealed our work was having an impact. It really didn't matter if we got the details just right. What mattered was the meaning we derived from the stories about who we are and what we do.

Interest in narrative modes of thought and expression has been growing in recent years. The "Narrative Turn" is a call to accept the limitations of theory and to dive into existence through the examination of the way in which experiences are meaningfully interconnected as elements in a sequence. 1999 Massey Lecturer Robert Fulford sees storytelling as "the juncture where facts and feelings meet, the bundle in which we wrap the truth, hope and dread." He says narrative is how we explain, how we teach, how we entertain ourselves and how we often do all three at once.[38]

Over the last three decades, the concept of narrative has successfully traveled from the humanities to many other disciplines like the health sciences. This development has surfaced the relationship between ideology and narrative. We can see narratives from the perspective of power – how stories can normalize experience, inspire hope, capture knowledge, liberate or "give a voice" to otherwise silenced groups.

In nonprofit work, we tell stories to raise awareness and guide action to persuade or dissuade a citizen, donor or policymaker. However, the stories we tell ourselves and others about ourselves can mobilize or immobilize us in our efforts. Stories can help us remember who we are, what formed or shaped our sense of purpose, what influenced our choice of work, and what we value. They help us understand, frame and name this moment in our careers, in a particular context, and in history. Through them, we see what's possible and what we're capable of learning and doing.

Yet, we have so few spaces in our schedules and workplaces for this kind of storytelling. When we prepare for a performance appraisal or a job interview, we are usually cobbling together the story or record of our achievements. But we are conditioned to tell these stories to promote a strength or explain a need, not to explore identity, context and potential for growth or innovation. We are trained to tell them as quickly as possible, preferably in the 90 seconds it takes to travel on an elevator.

Vocational renewal involves telling stories about the leaders we're becoming through the work we're doing. These stories also have the power to effect change in how we see ourselves as agents of a larger-scale change process. In this context, storytelling removes the underbrush to make a clearing from which we can take stock and consider next steps.

Narrative scholar Dan McAdams talks about the importance of transforming passion into a "progressive narrative of the self". "Narratives guide behavior in every moment, and frame not only how we see the past but how we see ourselves in the future." As much as any other personality trait, the themes that we draw from our life stories shape our behaviour. "We find that when it comes to the big choices people make … they draw on these stories implicitly, whether they know they are working from them or not," explains McAdams. The details of these stories, including high, low and turning points, reveal much about an individual's current mood and mental resilience. In the retelling of certain stories, the opportunity exists to heal old wounds as well as reframe outcomes in light of maturing professional insight or new information.[39]

In a conversation about vocational renewal several years ago, I was asked to recall a time when I first caught a glimpse of my vocation. Instantly, I was back in the Ottawa Women's Bookstore staring at a wall of political buttons declaring "No More Nukes!" and "Refuse the Cruise!" decorated with Sixties icons like the peace symbol or a clenched fist of resistance. I was nineteen, maybe twenty. I was studying political science and aspiring to a career in international development at the time. We spent many long hours in those days debating the merits of a "bread not bombs" approach to global security. But on this day, I was preparing to go on my first peace march to Parliament Hill and I needed to make a statement. My choice of button seemed very important.

I had almost given up finding one when I noticed a small, yellow button with the following words in red: Another Woman for Peace. The phrase was sheltered by a low hanging branch of a leafy, old tree. It was at that moment I recognized myself. A member of a community committed to peace in every sense. A woman, no longer a girl. An activist inspired by the wisdom of the ages, not the symbol of a single generation or group.

After recalling the story a few years ago, it became very important to own that button again. A sympathetic clerk at the Toronto Women's Bookstore took up my mission and called me several weeks later to say that a supplier had found it among discontinued, surplus stock. I loaded up on as many as they could find so that I would never be without one again or at risk of forgetting who I am.

The chance to recall this story showed me that my vocational identity was solidly formed in young adulthood. At midlife, I owed my resilience in a time of vocational drift to this fact. Whenever I pull on this thread in my narrative, my sense of belonging to a cause and a community deepens along with my resolve to become the woman described on the button.

Reflection

Like many people, I write to reflect. While others extol the virtues of journaling, I have always favoured letter-writing as a means to greater clarity and insight. In the writing process, I come to an understanding about an issue or question, and often walk away with a new-to-me idea or angle.

Early in my career, I graduated quickly from writing letters to grant proposals. Initially these assignments felt like a form of reflective practice but not for long. The turnaround time was short and there was little time for much research or conversation about what we wanted to do, why we needed the money and to what end. From time to time, the other end of the grant-writing process – evaluation – offered itself as an opportunity for reflective practice. I was taught to "plan, do and review" and to manage the cycle of "action-reflection-action," but often forfeited planning and reviewing when money and time were tight.

At the end of the day, I had very little time left over for reflection – period – let alone for reflection on my vocation. It always sounded like a good idea. Training events, conferences and workshops scratched the itch from time to time. I figured that was the best I could hope for. Learning through reflection simply had to take a back seat to doing.

To my surprise, this resolution was unsustainable. The old adage "pay me now or pay me later" proved true in this situation. As the volume of work increased, so did the need for some space in between activities. But I had lost my sense of having any control over the volume of work or pace of my days. I carried my undigested experiences around like excess baggage. There was less and less room for anything new. The lack of reflection had the same effect as a lack of

exercise. I grew sluggish in my thinking, sloppy in my writing, and irritable with colleagues. I no longer recognized myself. I forgot why the work was important or what it had to do with me if anything. I felt like a pack horse, an economic unit of production, a machine. I was on autopilot. To get back behind the wheel, I needed to carve out some time for reflection.

Business professor and management consultant David Hurst says that management concepts and theories are valuable in so far as they prepare managers to learn from their experience. He cites a longitudinal study on leadership learning by the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina which concluded that there are three kinds of experience that are known to be most effective in developing leadership: challenging assignments, significant bosses and hardships.[40]

Do we value learning from ourselves as much as we value learning from others? How much of our discretionary time do we spend taking in concepts and theories as compared to examining our own experience? My guess is that many of us don't know where or how to begin. Every religious tradition teaches something about reflection, but our western culture (and its nonprofit sector in particular) values action. Reflective practice has a counter-cultural if not a radical feel to it. It can also feel like a waste of time or a threat if it is not voluntary and carefully structured.

Reflection requires dialogue and discernment. Discernment is the less precise process of the two. It depends on a highly developed intuitive faculty and the patience to wait for a sense of direction. A senior executive with an international human rights organization writes that discernment is about creating "a clearing in the forest" and trusting the insight found there.[41] It is sometimes described as a distillation process that starts with framing the situation, shedding extraneous notions and issues, listening to different perspectives, then exploring, improving and weighing options before making a choice. A decision is not the end of this process. It ends with taking time to let the decision rest and notice feelings of contentment or distress. A final decision is made only after feelings confirm or reject the outcome of the process.[42]

Dialogue is a related but less intuitive process. It has a structure that differentiates it from other forms of discourse. It places equal weight on facts and feelings. It seeks understanding, trust and respect. Asking good questions is as important as having good answers. The dialogue model requires us to listen with great care. It recognizes and accepts that deeply buried values, identity and worldview need a good airing to be understood.[43]

Both dialogue and discernment need support. It is not enough to bring people together in any space, lob a question into the centre of the circle, and expect this kind of reflection to happen. We intuitively know when an environment is suitable and safe enough for conversation at this deeper level. The boundary

markers or touchstones that I trust come from Parker Palmer's work. "Always invitation, never demand." "Don't invade or evade." "Respect the silence." "Observe deep confidentiality." "Learn from yourself and others." "Speak what you know to be true in ways that respect what others know." The practice that has changed my behaviour most significantly is: "When the going gets rough, turn to wonder." Reflect on why someone holds a challenging view and ask questions, rather than asserting an opposing position.

The hardest principle of all for me is: "No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting straight." Sometimes my questions are not open-ended and come off as thinly veiled advice. I'm often tempted to insert my own opinion or information into the construct of a question. I ask: "Have you ever thought of it *this* way?" I'm learning that the best questions are those that come out of genuine interest or curiousity. With practice, I'm getting better at reflective modes of conversation and turning less habitually to more argumentative forms like debate.

Reflection, on my own and in a group, has become a well to which I return when I am tired, discouraged or puzzled by my work. It is also a proven source of sustenance and creativity, a way to make sense or meaning, and an indispensible tool for collaborative learning in the workplace. "In the beginning," writes poet Mary Oliver, "I was young and such a stranger to myself I hardly existed. I had to go out into the world and see it and hear it and react to it before I knew all who I was, what I was, what I wanted to be."[44]

The Questions

New opinions often appear first as jokes and fancies, then as blasphemies and treason, then as questions open to discussion, and finally as established truths.

George Bernard Shaw, a 20th century Irish playwright and political activist, made this observation about how knowledge is created. Having opened up the concepts of vocation, renewal, narrative and reflection, I'm more confident that my fancies and blasphemies have become questions for discussion, but they are a long way from being recognized as established truths. I'd like to come back to the questions that kicked off this conversation and offer some initial reflections.

First, is there a connection between vocational, organizational and civic renewal? I think there is a connection – one that is not highly visible but is absolutely crucial. It is also a tricky one that creeps into what we think of as personal and private territory. However, this century began with a crisis of public confidence in leaders from every sector. The long road to rebuilding trust begins with asking questions about the person who purports to lead and what motivates them, starting with ourselves. My mother used to say that whenever you point a finger there are three pointing back at you. Therefore, I propose that we start making this connection more visible by how we invest resources and transfer learnings across these three domains.

Second, is vocational renewal a missing link in our strategies to release latent organizational and community capacity? It may be an implicit goal of most leadership development programs, but it must become an explicit one. I would like to hear more from past participants about how their sense of vocation has been renewed. The perspectives of those who manage or fund these programs are much easier to find. I am also particularly concerned that young leaders do not have sufficient opportunities or resources to assist them in forming and acting on their initial sense of purpose. In her seminal book on purpose formation in young adulthood, Harvard professor Sharon Daloz Parks makes a persuasive case that mentors who ask "big enough" questions and mentoring environments that support the discovery of vocational identity are critical in this season of life.[45]

Third, can the concepts and practices demonstrated by the *Courage to Teach* program give shape to a range of informal and formal approaches to renewal? My answer is yes. I find two concepts most instructive: the tragic gap and the trusted cohort. Good approaches to renewal inspire us to change the way things are and to work creatively in the gap by giving us an experience of what could or

should be. Further, a cohort of similarly motivated individuals who challenge, support and earn trust over time are usually found at the centre of such an experience. Vocational renewal is work we do alone and together.

As for practices, I prize the boundaries and touchstones to guide reflective practice described in the last section. Not to be confused with more familiar guidelines or rules for efficient group work, they are deceptively simple. They make deeper conversation possible. They make it safe. They keep it grounded. I also value the practice of radical inclusion. Individuals are encouraged to speak and relate in ways that are resonant with their own rich cultures but the space in which they come together is neutral if not downright plain. Only nature in all its glory decorates this shared space. The seasonal cycle of the program unifies without creating uniformity. It goes straight to the heart of every culture, and sets a common rhythm. It also helps urbanites like me reconnect with the natural world and its undeniable wisdom.

Any apprehension about this program and others comes from an overarching concern about their cost. The Center for Courage and Renewal charges fees, has secured grants to underwrite expenses for different professional groups, and offers subsidies to those who need them. Participants, their organizations, grantmakers and donors are their indispensible partners.

In principle, I support the idea that beneficiaries commit a portion of their own resources to their professional development. In reality, I know that not everyone or every organization is able to do this. Many in the nonprofit sector struggle with the high price of taking any time away from family let alone three days four times a year. Similarly, many nonprofits do not even have a professional development budget line. For these reasons, I'm committed to conceiving informal, low- to no-cost approaches to vocational renewal as a sustainable alternative. The evidence, however, is growing stronger that this work has a legitmate claim on professional development budgets of every size.

Having looked closely at this American model, I wonder now what an authentic, made-in-Canada strategy to promote vocational vitality among nonprofit leaders might look like. I have some hunches about what it should and shouldn't include. I offer them as a bridge to a fourth question and our next conversation: How do we support the process of vocational renewal within Canada's nonprofit sector today?

My strongest hunch is that changes in our nonprofit workplace culture are required. As a start, we need more collegiality. Collegiality is one of those words that evokes in me nostalgia for those days when seasoned co-workers naturally mentored more inexperienced ones and we sought out each other for advice. We took turns listening and talking. I know that there are people who still value and practice this way of working. However, fierce competition for and limited access to certain kinds of leadership opportunities continue to dilute these modest

efforts to build civil working environments. We need to focus on weaving strong, trustworthy networks of peers who are committed to each other's vocational vitality and professional growth.

I suspect that we also need a different relationship with time. There is a pervasive anxiety in the air that causes us to label everything urgent, fret about time, cut corners, draw premature conclusions, communicate only in Blackberry shorthand, and forego the experiences that we know will be beneficial in the long run. Anxiety is a virus that can infect individuals, workplace cultures and whole systems if left unchecked. The good news is that hope is also contagious.

There is considerable evidence that hope is a distinct strength and connected to resiliency in leaders and organizations, especially those undergoing traumatic change.[46] I think a progressive strategy to promote vocational vitality will consider what Aga Khan Foundation of Canada CEO Khalil Shariff calls the "architecture of hope" – the psychological conditions that enable the healthy development and growth of individuals and communities.

Author Barbara Kingsolver writes: "The very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope."[47] I have learned much about hope and what to hope for from people who have come to Canada from difficult circumstances in other parts of the world. Their stories put many of our biggest challenges into perspective, and reveal the traits of highly effective, self-renewing leaders.

A while ago, I had the chance to interview four leaders engaged in social change work in the Greater Toronto Area who had immigrated in the past 25 years. We talked about their early role models and approaches to community development, but the stories of their long journeys left the deepest impression on me. They were stunning stories of crisis and renewal: the devastating loss and painstaking reclamation of culture, family, community and identity in a brand new context. My sense is that we should be listening carefully to individuals who have made this kind of journey. Opportunities for reflection on diaspora stories should be factored into a Canadian strategy aimed at vocational renewal.

In a world made smaller by the forces of globalization, I am equally intrigued by the experience of nonprofit leaders in developing countries. They have taught me many essential skills over the years, but their greatest lessons have been about persistence. Honduran writer Elvia Alvarado puts it this way: "We campesinos are used to planting seeds and waiting to see if the seeds bear fruit. We're used to working on harsh soil. And when our crops don't grow, we're used to planting again and again until they take hold. Like us, you must learn to persist."[48] It seems to me that any effort to connect with our counterparts in other corners of the world will contribute to renewal by helping us see ourselves

and what is required of us through another's eyes. Local-global connections should also be a part of our approach.

In closing, I return to those worrisome trends relating to stress, burnout and depression. My hunch is that we are seeing the symptoms of an aging workforce struggling to adapt to a constantly changing work environment. Problems unrelated to work also appear to be spilling over into the workplace. Many young employees view management with greater cynicism and demonstrate less loyalty than older ones, resulting in inter-generational tensions.

Financial instability and lower compensation are not new trends, and may be more of an excuse than a reason for leaving paid employment in the nonprofit sector. That is not to say that they are not real issues. They are. However, they may not be the most decisive factors when choosing to leave nonprofit work. My point is that many of us speak about the days when money was tight and a sense of collegiality was strong as some of the best times in our careers. A financial crisis can uncork innovation if leaders hold a vision of themselves and their organizations as renewable.

An aging workforce, stressful lifestyles, a generation gap and financial constraints tell only part of the story. We bring two aspirations to work: to make a unique contribution; and to know that we're making a difference. When we sense a threat or an absence of trust, self-preservation overcomes our desire to contribute and productivity declines. If the perceived lack of trust is chronic, we simply give up, do the bare minimum, or turn to more disruptive activities such as complaining and gossiping.

What if the leadership deficit in the nonprofit sector today has something to do with this absence of trust – starting with trust in ourselves and radiating out to our colleagues, boards, funders, donors and extensive network of relationships? What if this doubt and insecurity we feel is preventing us from making the commitment necessary to be the change we want to see in the world? What would we do differently?

We know trust comes from having honest conversations about things that matter. At a time when the community's stores of social capital have been seriously depleted, the workplace appears to be prime real estate for substantive, trust-building conversations. New York University law professor Cynthia Estlund says that "the typical workplace is a hotbed of sociability and cooperation among co-workers day after day, and often year after year. And that interaction is increasingly likely to cross categories of race and ethnicity, as well as gender. The striking convergence of close interaction and growing demographic diversity makes workplace ties crucial in a diverse democratic society."[49]

Therefore, the civic value of the millions of conversations that take place every day among co-workers is great and largely unexamined by those of us engaged in

nonprofit work. I wonder if a conversation about vocational renewal on the edges of our workplaces might have organizational and civic value – and more. I wonder where this conversation might already be underway. I wonder who might be ready to start another one. I wonder …

Postscript

I wrote this paper to start conversations about vocational renewal with nonprofit leaders. 45 people from the Greater Toronto Area accepted the Metcalf Foundation's invitation to participate in three, two-and-a-half hour gatherings between December 2008 and February 2009. They were designed to engage participants in reflection on vocation, not in a collective critique of my thinking to date. Each session began with a question to elicit something of each individual's vocational story. Different images from this paper – "blizzard of modern life and the rope tied to the back door" and "the thread that we follow that goes among things that change" – were used to invite reflection on their own, in pairs and as a group.

The first session was for Metcalf's advisors in its three priority areas: arts, community and environment. A cross-section of executive directors from organizations that receive Metcalf grants found their way in a wild snow storm to the second session. The third brought together alumni of a leadership development program for mid-managers sponsored by Metcalf, United Way Toronto and the Schulich School of Business at York University. The diversity of these groups helped me reflect on the lifespan, cultural and organizational issues related to vocational renewal.

Two of the three conversations took place in the Upper Library at Massey College and one at the Quaker Meeting House to test my assumptions about the kind of space that is conducive to reflective practice. Dr. Christopher Lind, a Massey Senior Fellow and social ethicist, facilitated the two sessions at Massey. A former Executive Director of Greenpeace Canada and long-time social activist, Jeanne Moffat, facilitated the session with executive directors. They made it possible for me to listen actively, track themes and attend to the dominant and emerging narrative in the moment.

What I heard was a classic transition story: the old is no longer and the new is not yet in this world of ours. Those who have stepped into the void to lead at this particular time are motivated by many factors, including a sense of vocation. The word "vocation" turned out to be a powerful one. I learned that we give it our own meaning, replace it with another word, or make a decision to leave this dimension of our professional selves unnamed. How we understand the word is as personal as our signatures and reveals something of our identity and culture to others.

Participants confirmed that questions about vocation come in and out of our minds like the tide. Everyone's timetable is different. There are, however,

predictable cycles and seasons: young adulthood, midlife and pre-retirement. Voluntary and involuntary employment transitions also open up space for these deeper vocational questions.

Thinking and talking about vocation can feel like a luxury or indulgence because it is so rare in our time-strapped days, I was told. It is more common to talk about work-life balance than why we do the work we do. One participant reminded us that the best places for such conversations are public, private and collegial like "the bus, the bath and the bar." All appreciated the opportunity to reflect aloud with peers in related but different fields. The cross-sectoral personality of these conversations made it easier for some to relax, set aside immediate concerns and focus on themselves for a change. Others said that they found the group's similarities reassuring and differences refreshing.

Participants recalled other times when they had been in situations conducive to reflection on vocation. Some described formal programs rooted in a trustworthy cohort and focused on the exploration of different dimensions of leadership starting with self. A few had benefited from sabbaticals or other paid/unpaid leaves. Others talked about informal experiences like annual wilderness canoe trips with peers or regular coffee dates with mentors. Examples revealed the diversity of needs and the importance of an equally diverse set of approaches.

After many months of labouring on my own, it was refreshing to listen and learn from others. Their words now fill pages and pages of my notebook:

- "What drains and sustains me are often the same things. I know that I need renewal when I stop welcoming challenges and start resenting them."
- "Our vocations must be affirmed by others – just because I think I am the King of France doesn't make me the King of France … it just makes me delusional."
- "I am very clear that my vocational identity comes from my core cause and values. Staying connected is about knowing my limits."
- "Connection sometimes requires a time of disconnection … you have to let go of the rope to find out. Work can become habitual very quickly."
- "There is no shortage of work to be done. It is important to know that you're in the right fight."
- "It is my calling to call others. To build a movement. To combine artistic motivations and social engagement within a sense of vocational identity"
- "We often say: I can afford this. I can take the risk on behalf of those who can't. What if I can't anymore?"
- "Who has access to time, space and resources for reflection on vocation?"
- "How is burnout different from disappointment or frustration?"

- "Is there room for spiritual or religious perspectives on vocation and renewal in a secular conversation?"

During the session with executive directors, I was surprised by evidence of my complicity with the culture that devalues reflection and favours the "just do it" brand of action. A participant pointed out to me privately that I had thanked the group several times for squeezing this conversation into their busy schedules. At the end, we closed quickly on the assumption that participants must be anxious to get back to work. It hadn't occurred to me to encourage those who wanted to continue the discussion over lunch to do so. Nor did I facilitate the exchange of e-mail addresses to keep the conversation going among those who had found it particularly useful. I take from this anecdote that cultural conditioning runs deep. Even when we know better, we're not always able to do better. Culture change is a process, not the result of a single event.[50] For me that day, the process was a humbling one.

On the edges of these three conversations, I also met one-on-one with a handful of nonprofit leaders. These seasoned professionals approached issues related to vocational renewal with a wide lens. Their questions and insights came from examining workplace systems and structures for how they lift up or push down individuals to achieve organizational goals. They were interested in how a vocation is lived out within the nonprofit workplace – and if not, why not. One talked about "human deficits" being as unacceptable as financial ones with disastrous consequences for organizations and society. He wondered how to keep organizations on the positive side of this ledger through inevitable changes in senior leadership. Is it possible to embed sound HR principles and practices so neither individuals nor events can dislodge them?

Another person wanted to look more closely at prevailing assumptions about nonprofit careers. She was concerned about the pressure to take on progressively more responsible positions, and to move in and out of different organizations – even when the result might be an ungrounded or divided life. What if our vocations are tied to a particular role, organization or community, she asked? Might a deeper, longer relationship with one organization or community have at least as much value as a series of shorter stints in a variety of settings? Similarly, how might we remodel current approaches to career and succession planning to help individuals discern the fit between who they are, what they want to do, and what others see them doing?

Someone else zeroed in on employment transitions in general and retirement in particular. He spoke of the need for HR policy changes, financial options and flexible pension arrangements to facilitate vocational discernment and experimentation with different roles or jobs – to ease the process of letting go of positional power while staying connecting to our own.

Needless to say, I'm not a human resources expert. The national agenda for renewal in human resources policies and practices in the nonprofit sector is in the capable hands of the HR Council for the Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector.[51] However, these one-on-one conversations got me thinking about how accountability for individual and organizational performance is currently shared. How do we delineate what's mine and what's ours in the workplace? Could accountability be allocated more equitably between the individual and the organization? I've observed that the interests of individuals surface in HR discussions in two ways: as personal issues or "private troubles" requiring a remedial response from the organization such as an employee assistance program, or as professional issues necessitating mandatory training and formal supervision by management.[52]

But cultural fit, for example, is a personal *and* professional issue. It is related to ongoing job satisfaction, performance and impact. If so, it should be assessed continuously and in ways that empower individuals to act on what they discover about themselves. This could mean deepening a commitment, severing an employment relationship or something in between, but such a process is one way to rebalance accountability. It suggests that cultivating inner authority is as important as deferring to positional authority on the question of cultural fit.

This perspective is echoed in a very recent study called *Finding Leaders for America's Nonprofits*. It calls on prospective employees to learn about themselves, not just the organization that they hope to join. "Cultural fit is the deal breaker … Job seekers often make the mistake of assuming that figuring out the fit is largely the responsibility of their potential employers," conclude the authors. It also emphasizes the need for leaders from the private or public sectors to test their assumptions about nonprofit workplaces before crossing the cultural boundaries.[53]

I leave these larger questions aside for now, knowing that the conceptual bridges spanning the 'person and profession' or 'individual and organization' are not very sturdy yet. Many of us would much rather have our feet more firmly planted on either side than stand in the middle of a bridge under construction. I continue to think of 'work' as a bridging concept and 'vocation' as integral to it. In so far as we're committed to innovation in the nonprofit sector, we'll find ourselves at the edges of conventional thinking.[54]

Two unplanned opportunities to meet with two groups of younger individuals presented themselves in March 2009. Massey Senior Resident Mary Jo Leddy invited the College's Junior Fellows to reflect on the question of vocation in her suite on campus one weekday evening. At the time, she was on sabbatical from teaching at the University of Toronto and directing Romero House – an organization dedicated to refugees and their families. The second opportunity was offered by the Metcalf Foundation program directors who oversee

internships in arts and environmental organizations. My conversation with Metcalf interns was tagged on to a regular meeting at a local theatre. The less formal nature of these two sessions and how they were initiated gave me some unexpected insights. They have informed my recommendations.

There is much to say about what I've learned so far about narrative inquiry and reflective practice as tools for innovation from this fellowship. I have filed it away for now, but will share one lesson: if you need quick answers, find other tools.

It had been my intention to do a tidy piece of research in a couple of months, condense it into a simple metaphor or conceptual model, and deliver it – on time, on budget. This delusion persisted until the day that I tried to force my thinking into abstract constructs and images associated with the conversion from finite to renewable energy sources (like windmills.) Thankfully, gentle but firm colleagues called me back to the real stories and questions found in the practitioner experiences, including my own, that had drawn me into this topic in the first place.

What I didn't know before I headed down this path is that narrative has the power of an undertow. Once you start asking yourself and others for stories, you are pulled down, dragged along the ocean floor, and then carried out to sea by them. I'm learning how to work at these depths with its different rhythms and pressures. It is, however, a much slower and more dynamic process than I had ever imagined. What I've brought to the surface and put into this paper is the first harvest, but not the last.

Action

I began with the idea that continuously renewing our sense of purpose or vocation through reflective practice helps sustain our commitment and effort as nonprofit leaders. You'll recall that reflective practice involves *actively* witnessing and examining our lived experience for the purpose of learning from our work and lives – the relationship of "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" to professional activity. The first is about thinking on our feet, and the second is about thinking about where we went, what we did and why. We do this so that we can keep learning and growing professionally.[55]

This fellowship has given me the chance to reflect in these ways on vocational renewal for nonprofit leaders and now I'm ready to take the next step – to begin translating learning into action. I have come to the end of this beginning knowing three things for sure:

1. Everyone can benefit from conversation about why they do the work they do, not only those who are at the top of their game or lagging behind.
2. Investments in the vocational vitality of individuals inoculate workplaces prone to stress and even burnout, and stimulate trust, creativity and innovation.
3. Vocational renewal is inextricably tied to organizational and civic renewal.

This knowledge leads me to four actions. They are pathways to specific, measurable outcomes for nonprofit leaders: greater integrity, maturity, resilience and competence. In the world of nonprofit capacity building, they might be seen as the footpaths and not the main roads. On them, we travel at a slower speed but they too lead to improved organizational performance and community impact.

The outcomes that define this destination have been well-documented by policymakers, academics and practitioners alike. Often, these documents read as if these outcomes can be achieved without an investment in those responsible for delivering them. In fact, a subtext is that nonprofit leaders are expected to achieve them at their own expense if necessary. Can we reframe the destination in a way that does not take the vitality of nonprofit leaders for granted?

Action 1: *Define and measure the "vocational vitality" of Canadian nonprofit leaders.*

This reframing could begin with defining "vocational vitality" and figuring out how to measure it. As a starting point, I return to Sam Intrator and Robert Kunzman's work with American public school teachers. They've defined "vocational vitality" as:

- *engaged* – feeling vital, present, and deeply connected to their students and through the ebbs and flows of their work lives
- *engrossed in their roles* – channeling energy into the physical, cognitive and emotional labours of their work
- *tuned in* – being highly sensitive to the needs of people and the context
- *purposeful* – initiating improvements in current conditions, responding to adversity, and viewing themselves as capable of challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting[56]

How might we build on this work and gather data on Canadian nonprofit leaders? Could we create a vocational vitality index or add leadership strength indicators to ongoing research on the state of the nonprofit sector or cities, like the Toronto Community Foundation's *Vital Signs* report or the HR Council on the Voluntary and Nonprofit Sector's labour force surveys?[57] Notions of "leadership strength" or "vocational vitality" widen our focus to see what might prevent recruitment and retention problems, and what might create stability in the midst of change. They also help us remember that sub-strategies geared to the needs of individuals, as well as teams or groups, strengthen strategies aimed at improving systems and increasing organizational capacity.

Action 2: *Seed and tend informal peer networks for conversation on vocation wherever conditions are hospitable.*

"What if I don't know what my vocation is? It feels like I need more time away from the day-to-day pressures to connect with it, but what would I do … sit and think by myself?" The nonprofit leader who asked these questions was not necessarily looking for a quick fix or a program. She was open to finding answers with the support of her peers. How might she connect more easily and routinely with those who are asking similar questions? Where can she access resources that evoke, sustain and renew her vocational vitality?

Through this research, I have met people who are natural conveners of peer networks and learning circles in the arts, environment and community. They see this role as a dimension of their vocation. What do they need to initiate and tend self-organizing, self-sustaining networks? How do we free up time, space and resources to make the benefits of reflective practice accessible to anyone

who is ready for the conversation? I'm imagining networks and circles that reflect the country's diversity and commonalities – organized across the three sub-sectors and around gender, age/stage, role or cause. Think of a book club in which the book has been replaced by each participant's vocational story. Listening with great care and asking good questions is what we would do for each other in these circles.

An orientation for would-be conveners to sound principles and practices for creating safe, trustworthy and collegial space is a first step in this direction. I've chosen the word "sound" after much deliberation. It can be applied to approaches that are grounded in peer-reviewed research, rigorous evaluation and solid evidence, but it does not exclude common sense, emergent ideas or innovative methods. One of my next moves is to turn what I've learned through my fellowship into an orientation for those who are looking for a reliable starting point for conversations on vocation. I also have a perspective to share on "hospitable conditions." Call them conditions that invite, welcome and include people who are ready for the conversation. They suggest a response to a need articulated by two or more people, not the imposition of an agenda. Participation, therefore, is voluntary.

What I'm imagining are "tools of conviviality" in keeping with adult educator Ivan Illich's vision of autonomous and creative exchanges among people and with their context. He rejected manipulative institutions and favoured convivial ones "characterized by their vocation of service to society, by spontaneous use of and voluntary participation in them by all members of society."[58] So do I. I've learned that my vocational ground is easier to hold and less likely to erode if I'm part of a collegial community.

Action 3: *Make participation in sound, formal programs geared to vocational renewal more affordable and accessible – especially for early career professionals and newcomers to nonprofit work.*

While she was on sabbatical, a nonprofit leader sent me this quote from author Elizabeth Hay's award-winning novel *Late Nights on Air*: "He'd reminded himself of caribou at the river's edge. They retreated once, twice, three times. He'd never known before that migration wasn't one unbroken forward movement; it was sideways, backwards, forwards, a passage enlivened with indecision." This image of the caribou evoked my own experience of vocational renewal. Although I've never had a sabbatical, seasonal retreats gave me the eyes to see this irregular pattern in my life and in social change work. Renewal programs like the Metcalf Foundation Renewal Fellowships and the *Courage to Lead* are investments in our capacity to see the larger landscape and to locate ourselves in it. They take us to lookouts from which we can survey the

whole scene. There, we stand still and take it in. This is not a break. This is necessary work.

Getting out of a familiar setting and into a brand new one with guides who know the terrain of leadership well has benefits for everyone. Unfortunately, the cost of formal programs – in time and money – can limit access to a privileged few. If financial assistance was available, how many more nonprofit leaders would take advantage of opportunities for vocational renewal? I'd like to see resources invested in programs that are:

- based on sound principles and practices (in line with the definition offered in my second action)
- accessible to people from diverse backgrounds and incomes
- geared to individuals ready for early career exploration, mid-career renewal, late career integration or employment transitions
- aligned to professional and organizational development strategic priorities

I'd also like to encourage providers of leadership learning experiences to find direct ways to help build community capacity in addition to what they do for individuals. Recently, I noticed a well-respected provider was bringing a high-profile leader to town for an exclusive two-day program. It occurred to me that this individual might be willing to donate an hour of his time for an open forum in an accessible, public setting if asked. Where possible, how might we leverage investments in individuals to benefit entire communities and vice versa?

We can expect a healthy return on any investment in the vocational formation of young adults. Vocational identity begins forming early on and continues throughout our lives. When it is time for renewal, we discover how important those first questions, experiences and mentors were. How might conversations about vocation be integrated into internships and leadership learning opportunities for young people? What about informal conversations on the edges of campuses and workplaces around their specific vocational questions?

I recently asked this question to a group of early career theatre and environmental professionals: "To what or to whom do you dedicate your performance?" Through their answers, I caught a glimpse of the artists and activists within the administrators, technicians, directors, dramaturges, stage managers, costumers and fundraisers who were in the circle. Their passion took over space that had been filled up until then with the daily frustrations and challenges of their work. Passion simply must be stoked from time to time. The risk is that it will die out while we're preoccupied with putting new information in young people's heads and tools in their hands. Further, inter-generational conversations on vocation hold the potential to equip both generations to collaborate effectively and creatively on the most urgent issues of the day.

The changing demographics of the nonprofit labour force indicate that the sector needs leaders as diverse in age, background and experience as Canada

itself and in much greater numbers than ever before. Reflecting on the pending exodus of the baby boom generation from the workplace, a 2006 American study found that the nonprofit sector will need to "attract and develop a leadership population 2.4 times the size of the total number currently employed."[59] This reality demands a response. A mentor of mine says that we don't have to have all the answers to the big questions facing us, but we still have to have a response. Formal opportunities for vocational renewal can be thought of as part of a response, especially for prospective employees from outside the nonprofit sector and newcomers to the nonprofit labour force.

Action 4: *Raise awareness of the connections between vocational, organizational and civic renewal.*

Etched on an expansive window at the front of Canada's new National Ballet School, passersby will see markings that can easily be mistaken for musical notes. Dancers will recognize them as a choreographer's notations for movement, not music. This private language of the body communicates much about the school's culture and identity. It tells a story transcribed in an accomplished graduate's own practiced hand – "Sometimes things happen to him. Sometimes he makes things happen."[60]

The decision to write a story in a cryptic code on the face of the new building was uncommonly bold and visionary. Why did those responsible for the renewal of this now 50+ nonprofit institution incorporate this subtly evocative element into their design? One reason is that they wanted to stir the public's curiosity and provoke questions. They imagined the beginning of a dialogue about what goes on within the school's walls and the possibility of a relationship with those of us who live outside the world of dance – something deeper than a financial transaction such as a donation, tuition payment or ticket sale. So, they engraved a permanent invitation on the body of the school: come inside and get to know who we are, what we do, and why it matters to us, to you and to this country.

From their base on Toronto's Jarvis Street, National Ballet School board and staff leaders have been walking alongside successive generations of children as they became dancers. They have played their part in Canada's maturing culture and creative economy. Who were these people who first set up a ballet school in the old Quaker Meeting House? What took them out of their warm homes on cold, winter nights to attend meetings, into boardrooms and living rooms to ask for support, and back to the rehearsal hall to watch a choreographer's imagination take flight in human form? And the people who came after them? What got them up in the morning to face the reality of an inadequate building,

cutbacks to arts funding and an uncertain future? What sustained their effort and commitment over 50 tumultuous years?

Mining organizational memory is part of the renewal process. Like us, organizations can forget who they are and why they do what they do. We call this mission drift. It occurs when events cause organizations to depart from their purpose and core values, usually in the interest of survival. It most often is tied to what they will or won't do for money.

Leaders ravel and unravel their organization's narrative to gain perspective on current challenges, to learn from past successes and mistakes, and to build resolve and courage to act . When an organization forgets how it began and where its been, it can become harder to make the right strategic choices about how to invest its inheritance – its human, physical and reputational assets. As the generational crevasse widens, its leaders find themselves on a high wire. A strong narrative that spans the past, present and future can lead everyone to firmer ground.

In a study of companies that have survived for one hundred years or more, we find the secret to longevity: preserve the core, stimulate growth.[61] This delicate balancing act is tougher than it sounds, isn't it? Growth is objective. It can be measured. As managers, we're trained in the use of measuring sticks. The rewards of growth are tangible. On the other hand, the core is as subjective as beauty. As leaders, we're called on to describe the core, cast a vision and be a model. The value of the core is intangible. I see the core as an organization's vocation.

Nonprofit leaders are responsible for holding the tangible and intangible together in a coherent narrative. For example, a capital redevelopment exercise is about making an old facility viable again and serving more people in better ways. It is about the next Karen Kain or Jeremy Ransom.[62] It is about Toronto becoming a world-class creative city. It is also about a vibrant cultural sector for Canada. This story, with its layered plot lines, reveals some of an organization's vocational identity and sets up the possibility of greater social impact.

When organizations are showing signs of mission drift, it is time for renewal. At this moment, many of us are experiencing temporary memory lapses as we wrestle with the immediate demands of an economic crisis. This is exactly the right time for nonprofit organizations and their leaders to renew their commitments, writes Peter Karoff, Founder of The Philanthropic Initiative: "Renew your vows. The passion you feel, or once felt, for the work that you do is central to the exercise of creative moral imagination. The centrality of philanthropy to the making of a better world is the heart and soul of why you are an actor on this stage."[63]

What vows need renewing in the nonprofit sector today? Do we need to rewrite them in a language that is meaningful to us or can we give new meaning

to the old words? What do we say about why we have chosen to be actors on a particular stage? What commitments can we no longer keep?

Our answers to these questions begin to shape a story that can contribute renewal at every level. Harvard professor and key Obama campaign organizer Marshall Ganz calls it "the story of self, the story of us and the story of now."[64] Leaders, who can tell these three-dimensional stories and who can help us craft them collectively, are better equipped to bind divisions, turn crises into opportunities, and spark change. In this storytelling process, we claim our distinctive individual and organizational vocations *and* our common vocation as citizens. Time and time again, I hear from nonprofit leaders that they "just know" when alignment across these dimensions exists.

I'd like to see nonprofit leaders integrate reflective practice into organizational life and to hear them tell multi-dimensional stories. Stories that share something of who they are, where they came from and why they show up for work each day. Stories that reveal the invisible and visible impact of our activities. Stories that help us make sense of what's going on. Stories that interpret truths that knit us into a stronger community. Stories that link the past, present and future. Stories that embolden us to do things we've never done before. Stories that spur sacrifice.

I encourge us to write these stories down and to turn them into measurable strategies to move our causes forward. Let's tell the long version at appropriate intervals and on important occasions. Reduce them over a low heat to their essence. Wear them on t-shirts and buttons. Carve them into stone or etch them on glass. Reenact the best ones over and over again.

I end this section on action with the question "why act?" Why walk any one of these four winding paths with me or one of your own? My answer is buried in the words of Scottish political philosopher John Macmurray: "All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, all action is for the sake of friendship."[65] I have not found a stronger statement of purpose for myself or the nonprofit sector than this one, nor a better reason to continuously renew a sense of vocation in individuals, organizations and society. On this scale, movement is registered in subtle and seismic shifts – for as we change, the world changes.

Conclusion

While I have been on this footpath, nonprofit leaders have been working with leaders in other sectors to find a road to economic recovery. The global recession, we're told, will likely be deep and long. It will disrupt business as usual and may even destroy existing industries. Some say we cannot expect to recover our losses, only to start again. Others counter with a longer view – an ecological perspective – that sees crisis as having the power to break constraints and regenerate whole systems.[66]

A cross-sectoral group of leaders who weathered Hurricane Katrina in 2005 got together two years later. They sifted through the entrails of the storm and learned that in a crisis:

- systems fail
- plans are insufficient
- the picture gets distorted, no one can see what's actually happening
- time is compressed, each minute counts
- authority is limited and limiting, attempts to control can hinder rapid and effective responses
- new leadership emerges, individuals step up and plunge into the fray

"Katrina unraveled existing leadership structures and capabilities and at the same time unleashed exceptional leadership, courage, resiliency, and creativity from many individuals," they concluded.[67] Dare we hope that the current economic crisis delivers this outcome for Canada and its nonprofit sector?

If so, we have choices to make. In the Winter 08 edition of *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, Paul Light offers four scenarios for the nonprofit sector's future: the rescue fantasy, a withering winterland, an arbitrary winnowing and transformation. Failing to choose among competing scenarios will likely result in "either the withering of organizations that comes from inaction or a random winnowing based on influence and ready cash, not performance," he says. Only by making an informed, deliberate choice can the sector "reap the benefits of transformation."[68]

This scenario requires "collective action by the sector's stakeholders: communities, philanthropists, governments, intermediaries, constituents, nonprofit associations." Light's analysis suggests that this is no time for competitive quibbling or quarreling. My hope is that conversations on vocation will cultivate mutual regard and a sense of common purpose among a diverse group of leaders across sectors and within our own. Through reflective practice, we will become better equipped to hold our ground and stand together in any

scenario. These conversations will help us discern what we can and can't control. They will help us catch our breath and reset our expectations. They will help us make the old new. They will help us stay focused on the work we were made for. Folk singer James Keelaghan tells the story well:

Oh, this world is changing
Spinning out through space and time
Oh, it's rearranging
All the things we thought were yours and mine
You've got to hold your ground, hold your ground, hold your ground
Sometimes it seems the motion is strictly retrograde
There are so many reversals of advances that you've made
The things you thought were changing have shuddered to a halt
But if we stand together we might turn this world around[69]

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Endnotes

[1] Seel, K. and A. Angelini. Strengthening the Capacity of Executive Directors. A paper presented at the ARNOVA Conference (2004), retrieved on April 29, 2009 from http://www.vsi-isbc.org/eng/hr/reports.cfm

[2] From Stepping Up or Stepping Out: A Report on the Readiness of Next Generation Nonprofit Leaders, Young Professionals Network (2007) http://www.ynpn.org/s/936/images/editor_documents/YNPN%20Resources/YNPN_SteppingUp.pdf, retrieved on November 1, 2008

[3] My understanding of reflective practice has been influenced by the work of Donald Schön. A good summary of his thinking by Mark K. Smith can be found at http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-schon.htm, retrieved on November 1, 2008.

[4] Rick Jackson, Co-Director of the Center for Courage and Renewal (CCR) on Bainbridge Island, sparked and encouraged my interest in vocational renewal. He introduced me to the work of Parker J. Palmer and modeled a very different approach to leadership than the one that dominated my world at the time. I am deeply indebted to him. It is also important to note that the Center coined the phrase "reconnecting who we are with what we do." For more information on the Center, go to www.couragerenewal.org.

[5] To do the "one thing" that I talk about in this paragraph, I participated in a series of seasonal retreats in 2007 and 2008 at a residential centre in Bangor, Pennsylvania called Kirkridge. The quality of the conversation that I found in this beautiful setting made this work possible. I take full responsibility for its content, however, this paper is a product of a 'circle of trust' and many hours spent walking, talking and listening with Dale Austin, Eva DeCourcey, Donna Elia, Pam Henry, Lucy Jones, Donald Knight, Carol Kortsch, Allene Kussin, Therese Miller, Scott Morrow, Russ Moxley, Robert Renjilian, Jean Richardson, Lynn Robbins, Natalie Scholl, Anne Simmonds, Joanne Solarz, Lyn Solms, Amy Stapleton, Mardi Tindal, Frank and Linda Toia, and Rose Ann Vita. For more information on Kirkridge, go to http://www.kirkridge.org/courage-to-lead/courage-to-lead/courage-to-lead-79-97.html.

[6] More information on Metcalf Innovation Fellowships can be found at http://www.metcalffoundation.com/p_community_innovat.htm

[7] Metcalf Renewal Fellow Chris Cavanagh has also written a fine reflective essay entitled *A Gift of Rest and Obligations for the Care of the Self* (2007) that informed my thinking on vocational renewal. It can be found at http://www.web.net/□story/RC/A-Gift-of-Rest.pdf.

[8] The archives for *The Society We Want* project can be found at http://www.cprn.org/theme.cfm?theme=16&l=en; the late Suzanne Peters was instrumental in bringing this initiative to life.

[9] This quote has not been found in Gandhi's writings. His grandson Arun Gandhi provided this context and meaning in a recent PBS television interview: "… people kept saying to him that the world has to change for us to change. He said, 'No, the world will not change if we don't change.' So we have to make the beginning ourselves. It has always been our human nature to blame someone else for everything that is happening. It's never us. We are never at fault. And he tried to make us realize that we are just as much in the fault as anybody else. Unless we change ourselves and help people around us change, nobody will change because then everybody will be waiting for the other person to change." retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/kcet/globaltribe/voices/index.html on November 1, 2008.

[10] The book was called *The Active Life: The Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (1990). The excerpt was a poem by a 4th century Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu called *The Woodcarver.*

[11] William Bridges has influenced my understanding of change and transitions. I've read and re-read his book *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (1979) at every crossroad in my career. I often recommend his article called "Getting Through the Wilderness" to colleagues who are managing organizational change processes. It is available at http://www.wmbridges.com/pdf/getting-thru-wilderness-2006-v2.pdf

[12] Quinn Patten, Michael, Frances Westley, and Brenda Zimmerman. *Getting to Maybe: How the World Is Changed* (2007)

[13] I benefited from reading American anthropologist Thomas Hale's *Griottes and Griots: Masters of Word and Song* (1998) while reflecting on my vocational identity.

[14] This line is from Patricia Lackey Orr's poem A Cold Snap in *Final Romance* (1998).

[15] From "Now I Become Myself" in *Yes!* (Spring 2001) retrieved from http://www.yesmagazine.org/article.asp?ID=419 on November 1, 2008

[16] From Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation (2000)

[17] This is a line from American William Stafford's poem The Way It Is (1993).

[18] From Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABCs (1973)

[19] From Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (1965)

[20] From the Tamarack Institute's interview with Ric called *The Story of Somewhere*, retrieved at http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s61_2008g.html

[21] Parker Palmer calls this place the "tragic gap" in his book *A Hidden Wholeness: A Journey toward an Undivided Life* (2004). He suggests that the gap is tragic because it is inevitable and inescapable. He also has described how we can swing easily from "corrosive cynicism" and "irrelevant idealism" if we are not intentional about living in this gap.

[22] From The Moon is Always Female (2006)

[23] This document can be found at http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/reflections-on-a-program.

[24] Jackson, Marcy, and Rick Jackson. "The Threads We Follow," in *Living the Questions: Essays Inspired by the Work and Life of Parker J. Palmer* edited by Sam M. Intrator (2005)

[25] I am referring to Longitudinal Evaluation of the Courage to Teach Program (Intrator & Scriber, 2000) and Evaluation of Circle of Trust Retreats (Smith, 2007). Both evaluations are posted on the Center for Courage and Renewal's website at http://www.couragerenewal.org/resources/evaluation retrieved on October 31, 2008.

[26] Intrator, Sam M. and Robert Kunzman. "The Person in the Profession: Renewing Teacher Vitality through Professional Development" in *The Educational Forum* (Fall 2006). I summarize and extract key ideas from this article on pages 16-18.

[27] I have heard Parker Palmer speak to his movement model of social change and it appears in his books and other writings. This description, however, comes from the CCR. His 1992 article *Divided No More: A Movement Approach to Educational Reform* goes into his thinking in more detail. It is available at http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/divided-no-more retrieved on October 31, 2008.

[28] I have looked closely at 20 leadership learning programs that explicitly name renewal as an objective. I intend to publish an inventory as a companion document to this one at some point.

[29] These stages are explained in much greater detail in *The Adult Years: Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal* by Frederick Hudson (1999). I have Janet Sutherland to thank for pointing me toward Hudson and for a never-ending conversation about things that matter.

[30] As quoted in an interview with Allan Webber in "Is Your Job Your Calling?" in *Fast Company* (January 1998)

[31] Wheatley, Margaret. *Consumed Either by Fire or By Fire: Journeying with T.S. Eliot*, Journal of Noetic Science, November 1999 retrieved August 31, 2008. http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/fireorfire.html

[32] As quoted in the Spring 2008 issue of the University of Toronto magazine in an article by Stacey Gibson called "A Doctor in Kilgali" retrieved on April 29, 2009 from http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/08spring/james_orbinski.asp

[33] All quotes from John Gardner in this section come from *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society* (1963). Gardner was the President of the Carnegie Corporation and Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare under American President Lyndon Johnson. He founded two influential national organizations, Common Cause (the first nonprofit public interest group) and Independent Sector (the coalition focused on building the capacity of nonprofit organizations.) His term as a cabinet secretary was at the height of Johnson's Great Society domestic agenda during which quality health care was made more accessible to senior citizens, the federal role in education was redefined with greater emphasis on poor students, and the public broadcasting system (PBS) was created. Well into his 80s, he taught, spoke and wrote about the connections between the decay and renewal of societies, organizations and individuals.

[34] Intrator, Sam M. and Robert Kunzman. "The Person in the Profession: Renewing Teacher Vitality through Professional Development" in *The Educational Forum* (Fall 2006)

[35] David K. Hurst's book *Crisis and Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change* (1995) landed in my hands at just the right time to help me reflect on the relationship between crisis and renewal.

[36] The entire Gore speech can be found at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2007/gore-lecture_en.html.
[37] From Tell Me a Story: The Life-Shaping Power of Our Stories (2005)
[38] From The Triumph of Narrative (1999)
[39] Dan McAdams is a professor at Northwestern University who has written several books on narrative, including the classic *Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of Self* (1993). The McAdams quotes in this section are taken from an article by Benedict Carey called "This Is Your Life (and How You Tell It)" in the *New York Times* (May 22, 2007) retrieved on November 2, 2008 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/22/health/psychology/22narr.html
[40] Cited in *Crisis and Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change* (1995) Studies by the Center for Creative Leadership can be found at http://www.ccl.org/leadership/index.aspx, retrieved on November 1, 2008.
[41] Evans, Derek G. A Clearing in the Forest: An Experience of Discernment in a Time of Personal Transition (2002)
[42] Colleagues Debra Bowman and Peter Short showed me what discernment can look like in the workplace. Alexandra Caverly-Lowery has patiently taught me how to be discerning over several years. Parker Palmer explained the 300-year old Quaker practice of Clearness Committees which demonstrated to me the value of group discernment when faced with an important decision.
[43] Steven Rosell and the Roundtable on Renewing Governance (1998 – 2000) introduced me to a disciplined approach to dialogue. The roundtable's report *Changing Frames: Leadership and Governance in the Information Age* can be found at http://www.viewpointlearning.com/publications/books/changing_frames.pdf.
[44] As quoted in the article "Upstream" in *Orion Magazine*, May/June 2004
[45] From Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith (2000)
[46] In investigating hope, I chanced upon the University of Alberta-based Hope Foundation. Its "hope-lit" search engine can be found at http://www.ualberta.ca/HOPE/#.
[47] From *Animal Dreams* (1990)
[48] From Don't Be Afraid, Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart: The Story of Elvia Alvarado (1987)
[49] From Working Together: How Workplace Bonds Strengthen a Diverse Democracy (2003)
[50] I have been influenced in my thinking about "change as a process, not an event" by Drs. James Procheska and Carlos DiClemente and their *Transtheoretical Model of Change*.
[51] More information about the Council and its work can be found at http://www.hrvs-rhsbc.ca/
[52] Sociologist C. Wright Mills' definition of the "sociological imagination" has informed my use of the phrase "private troubles." For more on this thinking, go to: http://www.infed.org/thinkers/wright_mills.htm
[53] The Bridgespan Group, *Finding Leaders for America's Nonprofits* (April 2009) retrieved on April 29, 2009 at http://www.bridgespan.org/finding-leaders-for-americas-nonprofits.aspx
[54] With thanks again to sociologist C. Wright Mills for his way of seeing and holding this kind of complexity.
[55] Smith, M. K. "Donald Schön: learning, reflection and change", *the encyclopedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/thinkers/et-schon.htm retrieved on May 14, 2009
[56] Intrator, Sam K., and Robert Kunzman. "The Person in the Profession: Renewing Teacher Vitality through Professional Development" in *The Educational Forum* (Fall 2006)
[57] The Toronto Community Foundation's 2008 *Vital Signs* report can be found at: http://www.tcf.ca/Default.aspx?tabid=56
[58] Smith, M. K. (1997, 2004, 2008) "Ivan Illich: deschooling, conviviality and the possibilities for informal education and lifelong learning", *the encyclopedia of informal education,* retrieved on April 29, 2009 from http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-illic.htm. Maureen Fair at St. Christopher House led me to Illich and the right frame for this action.
[59] http://www.bridgespan.org/learningcenter/resourcedetail.aspx?id=946
[60] This dance notation records, in the handwriting of graduate Peter Ottmann, a variation from Act I of *The Nutcracker* choreographed by graduate James Kudelka. The choreography was created on the school's stage in the theatre named after one of its founders, Betty Oliphant. It was first set on

principal dancer and graduate Jeremy Ransom and captures a sequence in which his character entertains children played by National Ballet School students.

[61] Collins, Jim, and Jerry Porras. Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies (1994)

[62] Kain and Ransom are leading graduates of Canada's National Ballet School. Kain is now the Artistic Director of the National Ballet of Canada and Ransom is a former principal dancer with the National Ballet and now teaches at the National Ballet School among other things.

[63] From Peter Karoff's article "Reset: The New Name of the Game" in The Philanthropic Initiatives' February 2009 newsletter, retrieved on April 29, 2009 http://www.tpi.org/news_events/e_newsletter_archive/change_in_new_economy.aspx#reset

[64] As quoted in "Why Stories Matter: The Art and Craft of Social Change" in *Sojourners Magazine*, March 2009 retrieved on April 29, 2009 from http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0903&article=why-stories-matter

[65] As quoted in John Macmurray: Community beyond Political Philosophy, by Frank G. Kirkpatrick (2005), for more information go to: http://www.johnmacmurray.org/index.html

[66] David Hurst offers a helpful explanation of the ecological perspective on the current economic situation. It can be found in *Strategy+Innovation*, Volume 7, Number 7 (April 15, 2009).

[67] Rego, Lyndon and Rebecca Garau, Stepping into the Void: Reflections and Insights from a Forum on Crisis Leadership convened at the Center for Creative Leadership (March 13 – 15, 2007), retrieved on April 29, 2009 from http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/SteppingIntoVoid.pdf

[68] Retrieved on April 29, 2009 from http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org/Past-Issues/Nonprofit-Infrastructure/four-futures.html

[69] A few stanzas from "Hold Your Ground" in Albertan James Keelaghan's 2004 album *Then Again.*

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