The Dark Horse Conversation

Nonprofit Leaders Talk about Vocational, Organizational and Civic Renewal

Patricia Thompson

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Dear Reader,

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop times unfolding.
You do not ever let go of the thread.

William Stafford

This is the story of a thread that I've been following since the release of *Being the Change We Want: A Conversation on Vocational Renewal for Nonprofit Leaders* in May 2009.[1]

My first paper invited you to engage in reflective practice – "the active process of witnessing and examining our lived experience for the purpose of learning from our work and lives". It offered stories, ideas and questions from my 20-plus years in the nonprofit sector to get the conversation started. It was inspired by a decade of innovative vocational renewal work with American public school teachers led by Parker J. Palmer and his colleagues, Rick Jackson and Marcy Jackson.[2]

The thread is the notion that work and vocation are different but related, and reflecting on this relationship – on our own and with peers – can help us renew ourselves, our organizations and communities. It is also the belief that valuable knowledge can be found in the depths of our own stories or through what academics call narrative inquiry. Further, it is tied to a concern for the vocational vitality of nonprofit leaders and a hunch that reflective conversations uncork creativity and inoculate us from workplace stress.

This thread led me into conversations with a diverse group of arts, environmental and community leaders who received my paper through the

[1] Available at www.metcalffoundation.com
[2] Learn more about this work at www.couragerenewal.com. I commend everything Parker J. Palmer has written to you. Since my late 20s his books have shaped my thinking and approach to leadership.

Metcalf Foundation's channels and thanks to many others who circulated it through their networks.

Over 3,000 copies of the paper have been downloaded since 2009. Close to 150 people accepted its invitation to talk – one-on-one or in groups – about vocational, organizational and civic renewal. They sent me e-mails and spoke to me on the edges of meetings. We made arrangements to meet at neighbourhood coffee houses, cafes and patios or at their offices. When they expressed interest in talking with others who were asking similar questions, I organized small dinner parties and after-work conversations – some at Massey College, the University of Toronto's interdisciplinary graduate student residence, where I've been based as a Visiting Scholar.

A couple of times, I found my way to a blog where the paper was being discussed by people scattered around the globe – still a thrill for a baby boomer like me. A particularly rich conversation began when I answered a call on my Blackberry one morning from the executive director of a Northern Irish organization called CO3 – Chief Officers Third Sector. It led to an invitation to speak at a national conference on "the leadership voyage" for more than 300 nonprofit leaders. In preparation, Metcalf Foundation President Sandy Houston and I asked ten of their Canadian counterparts to meet with us – to pool what we know and discern what might have value to our colleagues in Northern Ireland. We had hoped to reconvene this group upon our return to Toronto and to share what we had learned from our days in Belfast and Derry, but were unable to pull together another meeting given competing demands.

Chief among those demands on me was a lengthy consulting assignment with a national organization in the midst of renewal and several shorter encounters with other nonprofits dealing with the devastating downstream effects of the global recession. Circumstances, not plans, had thrown my clients into the back loop of the ecocycle where they became overnight experts in what management professor Brenda Zimmerman describes as "creative destruction."[3] However, it was my oldest sister's death by suicide that trumped all others. This tragedy plunged me into my own renewal process just four months after I started this high-spirited and hopeful conversation.

As if all this wasn't enough, a listing for an unusual Cabbagetown house caught my attention just as I was trying to bring the conversation to a close. Before long, I was immersed in the world of social purpose real estate and thinking aloud about the kind of civic space that is conducive to reflective practice on issues related to vocational, organizational and civic renewal. I incubated a germ of an idea inspired by the house for six months before the

[3] The ecocycle begins with conception and moves through birth, growth, maturity, creative destruction and renewal before it begins the cycle again from a new starting point. See www.plexusinstitute.com for more information about Dr. Brenda Zimmerman's work.

property was sold to someone else. But my encounter with this house helped me organize my thoughts about civic renewal and start putting them into action.

Although I had deliberately set out on this inquiry without a map and only a few navigational instruments, I can see now that I could not have planned it any better than it has turned out. Instead of thinking, talking and writing about vocational renewal and its ties to organizational and civic renewal, I experienced it in every dimension – intimately and vicariously – by simply following the thread.

I did, however, contemplate letting go and abandoning this unconventional approach along the way. Stafford writes "*people* wonder about what you are pursuing" and I'm sure many did (and maybe still do.) But mostly, *I* wondered about what *I* was pursuing. *I* found it hard to explain to *myself* some days. It was hard for *me* to see. And still, I didn't let go of the thread – or perhaps more accurately, it didn't let go of me. Without question, I owe any unconventional wisdom I've found along the way to this fact.

So, I hope you'll think of the paper in your hands as a long letter from a colleague who looks forward to your reply. It's not a study by an academic, a manual by a trainer, a self-help guide by a coach or a report by a human resources expert designed to sharpen your skills or build organizational capacity, although it may colour how you read studies, manuals, guides and reports in the future. If it gets you thinking about the marriage of your work and vocation in these particular times, it will have served its primary purpose. If it helps you live out that commitment wherever you do your work, it will fulfill its potential.

Like you perhaps, I'm an often harried and rarely serene practitioner who is trying to keep my sense of vocation alive – to stay in the place where my "deep gladness meets the world's great hunger" and to do good work.[4] I've been learning over and over again that this is not possible unless I stay connected to people who are similarly motivated and brave enough to choose hope over despair in these transitional times.

Author Rebecca Solnit writes that despair is a cool, black leather jacket in which everyone looks good, while hope is a frilly pink dress few dare to wear. She has observed that disaster often brings out the best in us, but concludes that it's braver to hope than to hide behind despair's confidence and cynicism's safety. It's time to redefine the word, she writes, and reclaim hope's power to effect change.

[4] I am indebted to Pulitzer Prize winning author Frederick Buechner for the definition of vocation that I live by. It comes from his book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABCs* (1973).

That's how I feel about the word vocation – what I call hope when it's dressed for work. It too has needed a makeover, a new look – one that suits the modern nonprofit workplace – to help us have a serious impact and not simply leave a good impression.

So, refill your favourite mug and make yourself comfortable. The conversation continues.

Welcome to the Dark Horse Conversation!

Unlike money and time, there is never a shortage of topics to talk about when nonprofit leaders get together: impact, funding, cutbacks, downsizing, mergers, diversity, social ventures, governance, sustainability, collaboration, accounting standards, new media, and more. With so much on our plates, we've become discerning consumers of conversation. We bet on the topics with the best odds: the ones most likely to deliver tangible returns for our organizations and causes.

In the last two years, some of us placed a wager on a long shot. We chose to have a conversation about ourselves in relation to our work. By taking a few hours to reflect on our motivations and experiences, we engaged in the process of vocational renewal. This process is about making and keeping a strong connection between who we are, what we do and why we do it. It enables us to face hard realities, take risks or make difficult choices like shedding an ill-fitting role. It also equips us to respond to the relentless demands of our work with clarity of purpose and energy year after year.

I was at the Dark Horse Espresso Bar at 215 Spadina in Toronto (one of Margie Zeidler's UrbanSpace properties and the first home of the Centre for Social Innovation) waiting for a colleague and nursing a latte when I realized that this conversation could be a "dark horse." Not a favourite in the race for greater organizational effectiveness and social impact. Rather, a bold bet with the potential to deliver a substantial return on a small investment of time.

I grabbed my notebook and started scribbling down what would be different about this conversation from others that day:

"A Dark Horse Conversation is about me and my work. It is selfish and selfless at the same time. It attends to my sense of purpose or vocation. It is about discovering or remembering the work that is mine to do – as [poet] W. H. Auden wrote: 'You owe it to the rest of us to get on with what you're good at.'"

"A Dark Horse Conversation slows me down and makes it easy to lose track of time. I leave it with more energy than I had when it began. It usually ends before it feels over."

"A Dark Horse Conversation moves me to the edges and into the shadows of my work. It gives me another perspective on what I've been doing or what's going on around me. It focuses me on what I may be avoiding or dismissing or denying or fearing and what needs attention."

"A Dark Horse Conversation turns me inward to listen to myself. It helps me tune out the voices of those who want or need something from me and tune into what matters most or what I need to do next. It amplifies the voice within me that never leads me astray."

"A Dark Horse Conversation does not rush to conclusions. It surfaces stories, raises questions, follows hunches but does not expect decisions. It explores the terrain of a persistent question and kicks up all the possibilities."

"A Dark Horse Conversation welcomes ambiguity and paradox. It recognizes that vocations reside in the dimly lit and quiet corners of memorable experiences. They are often found in the clutches of two true yet contradictory truths about ourselves. For example, I am practical and philosophical about my work."

"A Dark Horse Conversation acknowledges our authority. It puts knowledge derived from lived experience and stories on par with credentials and expertise. It inquires about core beliefs, values and assumptions and gives them a voice."

"A Dark Horse Conversation builds my reserves of hope, trust and courage. It helps me remember who inspires me, what drives me and why my work is necessary. It's like an emergency drill. It reminds me where to go when I need to make a withdrawl. It protects my sense of vocation from bouts of cynicism, frustration and disappointment."

"A Dark Horse Conversation is convivial. It takes place in open, creative and relaxed spaces where we freely associate and interact. [Twentieth century social critic] Ivan Illich says that conviviality is the opposite of industrial productivity.[5] *It is not controlled by contracts, curricula or doctrine or other external demands."*

A Dark Horse Conversation can be this and much more as I learned from having a minimum of one a week over eighteen months. During these

[5] See http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-illic.htm

conversations, many of you told me that a quote, story or question from my first paper launched you into reflection on the arc of your careers. You remembered the persistent people, situations and feelings that beckoned you into your fields. You wondered aloud about the privilege associated with doing "meaningful work" – who has it, who doesn't and how to narrow the gap. You talked about how leadership resources (like hope, trust and courage) get depleted and what renews them, including continuing education and peer support. A number of people indicated that they'd like to plumb vocational stories and questions with people outside their fields and communities, and thanked me for throwing a little light on this shadowy dimension of leadership. They resolved to reflect more and at regular intervals, citing the benefits of renewed energy and enthusiasm for hard work.

I also heard from others who do not see the real value or relevance of a "self-centred" discussion about nonprofit work. They believe in strong boundaries between their personal and work lives, and shared stories with me about how they maintain a healthy balance. They're puzzled by the notion of vocation, turned off by its religious connotations and cautious about cultivating unrealistic expectations about professional fulfillment. One person wondered if the sector is developing a personality that is more negative than positive, more pessimistic than optimistic, and more critical than creative, as evidenced by "chronic whining" about workplace challenges.

Still others described themselves as hapless canaries in a crumbling coal mine – sentinels of danger in a highly toxic work environment. They expressed a deep fear that the entire nonprofit sector is performing this function for Canada at this time. They believe that larger forces are steadily eroding our democratic institutions and practices, making the mine unsafe for everyone. Rather than singing louder or attending to those who have collapsed from these hostile conditions, they think sector leaders should be leading the way out. They reject language that separates work from life and leader from follower. They're looking for a new discourse that frames this reality in more political, change-oriented terms.

As I moved from one conversation to another, I listened to colleagues experiment with words to describe the depths of their leadership experiences. The skills and strengths needed to work in the "shallow end" where we can touch bottom are decidedly different from those needed for the "the deep end" where we can't. I heard that a sense of purpose resides most comfortably for many of us in a realm beyond language – in art, music, nature and poetry.

Secular and religious metaphors arose from our different cultural backgrounds and helped us find our way into the substance of the conversation. Images found in Parker Palmer's writings, like the rope tied to the barn door in a blizzard or the thread that goes among things that change, helped too. With arts

leaders, the idea of "finding one's light" resonated. Environmental leaders identified with the idea of "knowing when you're in your element." I picked up the notion that vocation is synonymous with "voice" for those of us who are advocates. Several people claimed new images to express their vocational identity and gifts. For example, I met a rainmaker, puzzle solver, community choreographer, trapeze artist, kite flyer, pilot and archaeologist – none of whom had these titles on their business cards.

A portion of every conversation also focused on why so many find it impossible to make time for reflective practice. They're aware of its benefits and grateful for financial incentives like the Metcalf Foundation Renewal Program, but these supports are not necessarily enough to drive changes in work habits. Many assume that it requires a big block of uninterrupted time away from the office and maybe even from the city, which they believe they cannot afford. For some of you, the choice to set work aside for a time means picking up a much bigger load upon your return – especially if you're working in small or mid-sized nonprofit organizations.

An executive director who had recently cut the ribbon on a major capital project and was showing no signs of slowing down proposed several ideas – from an executive exchange program to a peer consulting model. He wanted to make the point that we engage in reflective practice whenever we step away from our own desks for a while and focus on someone else's issues, not only when we stop working.

Another executive director who had benefited from a five-month sabbatical vowed to turn one Monday a month into a sabbatical day. I've not heard if he's been able to keep that vow and if not why. When I think about my own resistance to daily physical activity, I can understand our inability to change routines and habits simply because we know we should. But I have noticed, however, that overindulgence in doing good works has consequences similar to the overconsumption of carbohydrates and natural resources.

Most of you are noticing these consequences to a greater or lesser degree in your workplaces. You wanted to talk about the nature and prevalence of burnout. Some told me that they're not at risk of opting out or burning out, but know people who are. Others talked about compassion fatigue and its cousin outrage fatigue. A few were brave enough to share stories of experiences that "felt like burnout" or illnesses and events (like car accidents) that they interpreted as warning signs. The word itself was used in multiple ways to describe feelings that ranged from disappointment and frustration to dread and despair. From these conversations, I gathered lots of anecdotal evidence but little hard data about burnout as a medical condition and its impact on the nonprofit sector. A few reflections on different cultural orientations to time and productivity were coaxed from these anecdotes but not pursued.

Some people wondered aloud about the other stories within our stories, including issues related to age, gender, ethnicity, religion or spirituality. They were interested in using a diversity lens for a closer reading of the paper and a deeper conversation. For example, younger people were invariably concerned with the obstacles to acquiring experience while those at the mid-point in their careers were trying to make meaning of it. Older colleagues often announced that they have "one job left in them" and want to make it a memorable one. Less predictable, however, is how we approach the "shoulder seasons" or "in-between" times – when we no longer think of ourselves as young professionals but before we are established in our fields, or when our careers have crested and we can see retirement on the horizon. Whether we find these transitional times intolerable or invigorating, we have a common need to rework our professional narratives.

Frequently, the conversation turned to what makes our work difficult. The role of adversity in forming leaders and in achieving ambitious goals became clearer as we shared the challenges that keep us awake at night. Returning to what gets us up in the morning revealed the value of hard work (although it does not make it any easier) and generated emotional energy. During a recent presentation, an environmentalist who has been part of this conversation from the start asked a roomful of colleagues to list 15 things that serve this purpose. An audience member wrote her afterward to say that her presentation was "fantastically uplifting" and had "single-handedly kicked [her] out of her post-election slump!"

Everyone described a different mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. "What drives you?" elicited a different response than "what's driving you?" Their answers corresponded to the findings of Daniel Pink's research into the changing world of work. He cites autonomy, mastery and purpose as prime drivers. No one is a "coin-operated machine." Financial rewards and incentives matter most when tasks are boring or repetitive but less so when more creative, conceptual and complex work is required. Pink writes that as long as people are satisfied with their compensation, the way to drive higher levels of performance has to do with strengthening their connection to and pride in their work. "Effective organizations compensate people in amounts and in ways that allow individuals to forget mostly about compensation—and instead, focus on the work itself."

The issue of compensation, however, is still a very hot topic for us. We talked a lot about "the passion discount:" the assumption that nonprofit workers should accept a lower rate of pay (and minimal or no pensions) for the privilege of doing work in the service of a noble purpose. This cultural expectation is viewed with suspicion by some and as an injustice by others. Everyone agreed the monetary value of nonprofit sector work in relation to public or private

sector work should be debated more openly, especially given the loud rumblings in the air about accountability and wide income divides on the ground.

The larger cultural and systemic issues related to organizational efficiency, productivity and performance that affect individuals add up to a lengthy list for collective action by nonprofit leaders in Canada. Although these issues weigh heavily on us, this conversation was not about creating or doing more necessary, good and urgent advocacy work. It was about creating and holding space for ourselves wherever we might be at this time in our careers.

The motivations for stepping into this particular conversation varied. Those who were unemployed came to it with a very explicit and immediate need for community to help make sense of the transition. Those who were employed were mostly ready for change in their roles and responsibilities or the context in which they were working. They were interested in tapping into their earliest sources of inspiration and power before discerning options. Still others were content with their current employment arrangements but wondered about the "voice" of their vocation: how to hear it in the clatter and clamour of their days, how and when to use it, and how to strengthen it. In their concerns, I heard an echo of a phrase from a poem called *Call and Answer* by Robert Bly: "What sense does it make to be an adult and to have no voice?"[6]

Across the board, I heard that feelings of being stuck, isolated, bored and blocked creatively were alleviated by reflecting on experience for the connection between work and vocation – if only for an hour or so. Several people have signaled that they want to continue meeting, citing inspiration, renewed confidence and insights as some of the benefits. Their rationale for continually working on vocational questions was similar to the one offered by Christopher House, artistic director of the Toronto Dance Theatre, to the graduating class of Memorial University last year:

"... [I] encourage you to seek your métier, find a vocation that nourishes you, thrills you, and makes you want to rush to work in the morning. If your job is boring, change the way you approach it or change the job itself. Examine the impulses that led you to take this job in the first place ... The best way to stay alive is to keep learning, finding new challenges and new passions. Bob Dylan sums this up in his famous lyric: 'He not busy being born is busy dying.'"

Like many other conversations in the nonprofit sector, this one swung wildly at times between the poles which Parker Palmer calls "corrosive cynicism and irrelevant idealism" and "the way things are and the way things could be" before it landed somewhere in the middle. Palmer has helped me recognize this

[6] See http://www.robertbly.com/r_p_callandanswer.html

pattern in my exchanges with colleagues over the years. He describes this place as the "tragic gap" – tragic because it is inevitable and irreconcilable. But he reminds us that it is also the place of creative tension where we do our best work and achieve real, lasting results.

Learning how to bridge the gap and to resist the powerful pull to either extreme have been the most useful dimensions of the conversation for me. The marriage between my work and vocation has been growing deeper and stronger through the discipline of listening to colleagues' stories.

I wish that we had an equivalent of the Canadian engineers' iron ring ceremony in the nonprofit sector. It would be good to have a visible reminder of the sector's core principles to wear to work everyday like they do.

According to University of Toronto graduate Shubha Bala, six engineers at a university in Montréal performed the first *Ritual Calling of an Engineer* in 1925.[7] The idea was conceived in the aftermath of an engineering disaster to bind all members of the engineering profession in Canada into a values-based community. Nobel Prize winning novelist Rudyard Kipling was living in Canada at the time. He was recruited to design the secret ceremony and oath.

Kipling later said: "*The Ritual of the Calling of an Engineer* has been instituted with the simple end of directing the newly qualified engineer toward a consciousness of the profession and its social significance and indicating to the more experienced engineer their responsibilities in welcoming and supporting the newer engineers when they are ready to enter the profession." Ever since then, Canadian engineers from all over the world can be spotted by the iron rings on their smallest fingers.

There have been other learnings too, reminders to:

- read my own thoughts, experiences and context as voraciously as books by "thought leaders"
- see leadership as a set of activities that anyone, not only those who have positional authority, can perform when the opportunity presents itself
- question prevailing attitudes about who needs mentoring, what makes work meaningful, how we draw the boundaries between the personal and professional and think about work-life balance
- acknowledge the power of emotion in shaping organizational culture and in driving organizational change
- challenge the conventional way that organizations manage "leavetakings" related to layoffs or terminations and support the "wayfindings" related to recruitment or hiring processes and
- notice the architecture and physical space that give definition to the nonprofit sector and its work.

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[7] I read this story on National Public Radio's *On Being* blog on February 21, 2011. It was called "Iron Ringing Strengthens Traditions and Bonds". See blog.onbeing.org for the entire post.

In the pages ahead, I explore these learnings through stories of real and recent encounters in places like Massey College – where vocational identities have been formed and renewed since 1963 – and Northern Ireland, a country that holds hard-earned wisdom about renewal in its bones. I've chosen these stories because they challenge a convention, pose a useful question, or help me take in a larger portion of reality. Be prepared for them to meander the way that a good conversation might. I hope they serve as a springboard into your own stories and memories rather than a record of my own.

These stories are organized into three movements – a structure that I've borrowed from the musicians and dancers who I've come to know over the past eighteen months. Like environmentalists and other professional groups in the nonprofit sector, they speak a language that is different from mine. Listening to their stories has expanded my vocabulary and my appreciation for the myriad ways we experience the world of work.

In a less visible way, I've also been informed by insights gleaned from people like *New York Times* columnist David Brooks and poet-environmental activist Wendell Berry with whom I carried on an inner conversation between coffee dates. "It's not about you," insists Brooks in a recent column. "Most people don't form a self and then lead a life. They are called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling."[8] His argument churned up new questions about the problem that's calling me at this time in my career. What follows also includes a few tentative responses.

[8] May 30th, 2011 column in the *New York Times* called "It's Not About You"

It's About Us and Other Lessons

Composers often divide a long piece of music into movements – stories of varying length and tempo that together tell a larger story. At the end of a movement, it is common for an orchestra to take a minute or two to retune their instruments but sometimes a composer signals that there should be no break at all.

I suspect you'll want to take a break between each of the three movements in the long story that I'm about to tell you. Each one describes experiences and reflections of mine as a starting point for you to remember and think about your own. I don't think my questions or conclusions should be yours but they could be a hook to pull up others from your own experiences.

If it were music, I would encourage you to play the first short movement *andante* – at a gentle walking pace. It describes an ongoing conversation about vocational renewal that I've been having with young adults, myself and our times.

The second longer movement would be played faster because it attempts to capture the pace of organizational life. *Prestissimo* – extremely fast – probably more accurately describes how modern life feels but I'd like this movement to be played *allegro moderato* meaning "moderately quick." It reflects on the craft of organizational renewal from a few different angles, including a week spent in another culture and country. It closes with a reflection on the support that individuals and organizations need in order to navigate a time of renewal.

I've written the third movement to be played more slowly – *adagio* – which literally means "at ease." But by the time you reach the middle, the mood changes just a little. With a hint of *malinconico* or melancholy, I describe the challenges of civic renewal as I see them and share a vision of civic space conducive to reflective practice. This piece ends on a more upbeat note but is unfinished.

There is no single, correct way to interpret these movements. However, I invite you to read them in the same way you might listen to music. As composer Aaron Copland writes, "Music can only be really alive when there are listeners who are really alive. To listen intently, to listen consciously, to listen with one's whole intelligence ... inside and outside the music at the same moment, judging it and enjoying it, wishing it would go one way and watching it go another."[9] For reflective practice to yield benefits, it depends on exactly this kind of listening to each others stories and our own.

[9] Aleksander Hynna, a French horn player and a lawyer from Ottawa, sent me this quote from Aaron Copland from *What to Listen for in Music* (1967).

I. Vocational Renewal

Kay Dyson Tam just completed her first year at the University of Toronto. Like me, she talks to strangers. For an entire term, Kay spent one afternoon each week in the Arbor Room at Hart House (the university's arts, culture and recreation centre) at a table and holding a sign such as, "Looking for someone to talk about the importance of solitude" or "Trade the 'Best Advice You Were Ever Given but Didn't Follow' for coffee." Each week, Kay put a new question or proposition to the students, faculty and visitors on their daily commute to classes or meetings. At the front end of this social experiment, Kay set out her modest yet radical expectations: "I can only cross my fingers that my hypothesis about it holds true: that it'll add value and perspective to my life while fostering a greater sense of community at Hart House".

I didn't run into Kay on campus although we spend much of our time in neighbouring buildings. We met in a thoroughly modern way. I was following the 2011 CivicAction Summit on Twitter and chanced upon her mother's informative tweets and blog entries. I decided to follow her. A few days later, she tweeted about her daughter's blog, *Kay and other letters*. In a few clicks, I was reading Kay's thoughts "on being one of many in a world that pines for the unique."

"I'll be upfront and honest, right off the bat. This foray into the blog-o-sphere is self-serving. It's meant to help me flesh out some sort of purpose for my rather directionless life as one of 68,000 students at my university, one of 2.5 million people in my city, one of 6.69 billion people in this world …"

At this point, she had my attention but it was the following declaration backed up by a favourite quote of mine that made me want to read on:

"*Although I might often have different takes on daily life from which I extract some theory about how I will best live my life, I promise not to philosophize too much. I am one for (purposeful) action above armchair assessments of life. A quote from Viktor Frankl's* Man's Search for Meaning *resonated with me on this matter: 'It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.'"*

My response to this post was to invite Kay for coffee at Massey. In the Common Room overlooking the quad, she told me about her studies, the Hart House project and a few of her other community activities. We talked about our shared passion for poetry and longing for the incomparable wildness of Vancouver Island. We scratched the surface of questions we're following. She wondered aloud about her major. I asked her if she'd be willing to review this paper and think aloud with me about the next season of my work.

I have a lot to learn from Kay. Young adults like her know this newly digital, deeply divided and much warmer planet better than I do. I'm busy adapting to realities that they already take for granted. Their insights into this moment inspire me. Their ideals reignite my own. My ability to collaborate creatively with Kay and her peers has become as important – if not more urgent – as my ability to work with colleagues in different sectors and across disciplines.

Given Canada's demographics, no one disputes the need to create highly functional inter-generational workplaces. There is less awareness, however, that the vitality of our vocations is tied up in our ability to listen and learn from each other – rather than see the other as a threat or an obstacle or, even worse, irrelevant.

Finding my vocational footing in midlife has included remembering who and what formed my sense of self in my twenties. Spending a few hours talking about how we recognize a call to public life with a group of Massey Junior Fellows and award-winning political satirist Terry Fallis (who also sports an iron ring from McMaster University), author of *The Best Laid Plans* and *The High Road*, helped me critique our political process and examine why I'm no longer active in politics. A month or so later, I sat around a table at Romero House with interns who were living and working among refugee families for a year. By exploring similar questions with them, I felt reenergized and started to see how I could become politically engaged again.

After my first conversation with Kay, I was better able to take stock of what I've lost such as the chance to fulfill the dream of going to Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific as she did. But this list of losses also included a bundle of insecurities, misguided ambition and 60-hour work weeks.

The list of gains, however, was longer:

1. *Much less to prove and more to do.*
2. *A voice of my own.*
3. *Clarity about my commitment to the formation of young adults.*
4. *A reverence for the meaning I find in my work and all work performed with great care.*

5. *A suspicion of so-called "meaningful work" and the "helping" professions (for suggesting that we can only find meaning and be helpful if we choose to work in certain fields or sectors.)*

One of my biggest gains has been a healthy quarrel with the popular notion of work-life balance. I keep Wendell Berry's words close at hand to remind me that this pairing is not quite right:

"Only in the absence of any viable idea of vocation or good work can one make the distinction implied in such phrases as 'less work, more life' or 'work-life balance,' as if one commutes daily from life here to work there.

Aren't we living even when we are most miserably and harmfully at work?

And isn't that exactly why we object (when we do object) to bad work?

And if you are called to music or farming or carpentry or healing, if you make your living by your calling, if you use your skills well and to a good purpose and therefore are happy or satisfied in your work, why should you necessarily do less of it?

More important, why should you think of your life as distinct from it?

And why should you not be affronted by some official decree that you should do less of it? …"

After tallying my losses and gains, I'm more able to hear what's calling me – calling all of us – in Wendell Berry's voice and many others:

"There is a lot of work needing to be done — ecosystem and watershed restoration, improved transportation networks, healthier and safer food production, soil conservation, etc.— that nobody yet is willing to pay for. Sooner or later, such work will have to be done. We may end up working longer workdays in order not to 'live,' but to survive."[10]

Too much work for some and not enough for others. Not enough leisure time for some and too much for others. Too much work that hurts the planet and not enough that heals it. If we put ourselves at the red hot centre of problems such as these, we'll find good work, useful work and work that demands everything of us.

So, here's what I've learned.

It's not about me or you, my private passion or yours. My vocation is known by the problem I claim as mine and the company I keep. It's about us. What

[10] This excerpt comes from an exchange of letters published by the *Utne Reader* (December 2010) between John de Graaf and Wendell Berry. Berry was responding to de Graaf's article called, "Less Work, More Life."

gives life and sustains it. "Pay attention to what breaks your heart wide open," a friend advised me during a time of vocational drift not long ago. "Go to it. Plant yourself right in the middle of it. You'll find your vocation – and people who share it – waiting for you there."

David Brooks would describe that experience as a summons. "Life isn't a project to be completed; it is an unknowable landscape to be explored," he argues. The person leading a *well-planned* life emphasizes individual agency and asks, "What should I do?" whereas the person *summoned* by life emphasizes the context. She or he asks "What are my circumstances asking me to do in this time and place? What is needed most? What is the most useful social role for me to play?" These are questions answered primarily by sensitive observation and situational awareness, not calculation and long-range planning, writes Brooks. For a *well-considered* life, he encourages us to acquire skills for both approaches.[11]

Brooks pointed me to the problem of inequality that has been summoning me from the first time I was told that "life is not fair." Over 20 years ago, it presented itself as the problem of youth unemployment. I was a witness then to the federal-provincial labour market and social welfare policy development process. Later, I felt an irresistible pull to know the people behind the statistics by managing a set of community-based employment and education programs.

I'll never forget my anger and disappointment at hearing a front-line job search counselor in one of those programs refer to the people who had successfully completed its requirements as "stat-ables" – meaning our statistical report to our funder would show them on the positive side of the ledger.

I can also remember a failed attempt to reverse a decision by a funder to cut coffee from our budget. In our experience, the promise of a cup of coffee with peers at the start of a day helped job seekers get out of bed instead of pulling the covers over their heads. The program officer who represented the funder wouldn't accept the premise that coffee contributed to participants' success as much as other office supplies like paper clips and staples.

These experiences pointed to another problem that cuts across all sectors and levels within organizations: the problem of losing our respect for individuals and their communities when private troubles turn into public issues. Over subsequent years, my take on this problem has changed. It's wider. From conversations on work and vocation with a broad sample of nonprofit leaders, I've taken away a different outlook on the issues and myself. For example, I can see now that we don't have respect for ourselves or each other if we don't have respect for the natural environment.

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[11] August 2, 2010 column in the *New York Times* called "The Summoned Life"

This awareness is making a new claim on my vocational identity. In what psychology professor Dan McAdams would call "my progressive narrative of self," I'm ready to add waterkeeper to the mix that already includes midwife and griotte among other more conventional vocations.[12]

Environmentalist Meredith Brown's articulate defence of the Gatineau River against those who would dump septic tank sludge in it inspired me to take a closer look at my relationship with the Otonabee – the river that my husband and I walk most weekends with our Golden Retreiver near our house in the village of Lakefield, Ontario. When I met Meredith during a wintertime "fireside chat" on vocation organized by the Sustainability Network, she told me that the Otonabee hadn't been adopted yet by a group like the Ottawa Riverkeepers. In that moment, I could feel my heart break wide open.

[12] From *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of Self* (1993).

II. Organizational Renewal

After reading a post on Kay's blog about her Pearson College community, I started thinking about griottes again. If you read my first paper, you'll recall that griottes have a confusing position in their African tribes and villages. They perform many different roles as needed: diplomat, storyteller, historian, ritual keeper, praise singer, strategist in war and peace. They are counselors to chiefs and spiritual leaders. They are "time-binders" who give new meaning to old words, crafting and using stories to exhort people to action. They help leaders lead. I have a hunch Kay might be one too but only her tribe knows for sure.

Mine – the YMCA – called on me last year in the middle of a seismic shift, the kind that happen more frequently than in the past. On the eve of their 160th anniversary, YMCA leaders had set their sights on renewal and were ready to work more closely together to forge a stronger federation. A new chief executive officer had been recruited to guide their collaboration. He hired me to help him tell the story of this moment and continuing building momentum for change.

Their case for change was convincing. It made good business sense and is steeped in YMCA philosophy. They know a lot about change because they help millions of people change their lives everyday. They have also inherited an organization capable of renewing itself, having demonstrated this ability many times over the past century and a half. So, it was not difficult to find the words to tell this old story. It was much harder, however, to listen for what is summoning this large, highly diverse and pan-Canadian group of leaders at this juncture and to help them hear it too. The griotte in me knew that many voices and many different media, new and old, would be needed to make it audible. I also knew that we had to be sensitive to underlying beliefs and feelings as they drive what everyone thinks and does.

Much of what we did was planned and predictable but not everything. An idea for a special project landed in the middle of an ambitious workload and a string of deadlines. Under different leadership and circumstances, the idea might have been dismissed as "scope creep" but not this time. The decision was taken to build a table for Canada's YMCA – a 10-foot long boardroom table made from wood and artifacts from every YMCA and YMCA-YWCA in the country; artifacts that tell stories about what defines and inspires their work. An investment in the emotional bonds that tie 53 autonomous charities together into one national federation. A tool for communicating a new narrative stretching from the past into the future and firmly grounded in the present.

We enlisted the Brothers Dressler to build it. Twins Jason and Lars are two gifted contemporary furniture craftsmen who have mastered the art of repurposing old materials (and who earned their iron rings from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Engineering.) We also called on John Beebe for his skill

with light and shadow to photograph and document many disparate pieces becoming one beautiful and useful piece of art.

One year later the table was unveiled alongside a comprehensive federation strategic plan. Both creations carry the fingerprints of every YMCA and YMCA-YWCA, and tell the same story in dramatically different ways. The plan sends them off in an exciting new direction and the table calls them home again. This modern heirloom is a symbol of their shared vocation and tangibly holds the memory of who they are at their core, what they do and why it matters. It testifies to the astonishing power of collaboration. It shows us what it means to be adaptable – to take new forms and fit into an emerging design. It gives new meaning to the old idea that everyone must be at the table where decisions which affect them are made.[13]

The summons to work with the YMCA during the first months of this significant transition arrived at an opportune time. I was carrying big questions about the connection between vocational and organizational renewal, and here was my chance to do some field work – exactly ten years after I had left the YMCA to renew my own sense of vocation. Further, I was newly bereaved having lost my older sister so suddenly and so tragically two months earlier. Creative work and long-time colleagues helped call me back to the land of the living.

In the face of illness or death, we usually set aside our work for a time. Sometimes, these unplanned events interrupt and permanently alter the professional course we've been on. But when work is a source of "deep gladness," I've discovered it can also be a source of healing and renewal. In a recent interview in *the Globe and Mail* about returning to work after the death of his wife and fellow actor Tracy Wright, Don McKellar described a similar experience. "When Tracy was sick, I cancelled a lot of stuff, of course. Everything, in fact, except what she was doing. She was acting still, and I was helping her with that," he says. "In the last months, when she made the choice to act in this movie *Trigger* and when I thought about it after, she revived my interest in the importance of performing. She reminded me, in a way, of why I started in the first place. I just saw how important it was to her. It was sort of more important to her than her chemotherapy, for instance."

Taken together, these experiences leave me with an evolving perspective on plans. I've spent most of my working life writing them. I respect business models and metrics. I can't imagine the workplace (or my life) without them. Yet, I'm increasingly convinced that our plans are only as good as our capacity to create and continuously adapt them. Do they emerge from a live encounter with the people, places and times they aim to serve? Do they keep us focused on

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[13] To see the table, go to http://www.ymca.ca/en/news-and-events/a-table-for-canada's-ymca.aspx

having an impact or on ticking tasks off endless lists? Do the contraints of our plans focus creativity or shut it down? Are we able to slow down and absorb new information without stopping? Do we have the confidence to change direction when necessary?

These questions fit comfortably into books and conversations about innovation but I've been learning more lately from watching Jason and Lars in their studio than from reading or talking. They plan, but only after studying their materials for a long time. They adjust their plan to the realities they encounter in their materials and in their collaboration. They honour the commitments they've made to project principles and their collaborators. They don't fight the constraints; they follow their lead. Whatever they're given, their response is "we can work with that." They've been practicing their craft daily for many years (starting with Lego) and so they exude a quiet confidence that carries them through moments of doubt. All of their creations are composed of long-lasting components that can be easily be disassembled and either reused or recycled at the end of their useful lifecycles.

The traditional lifecycle model of organizations fails to acknowledge endings. Its emphasis on birth, growth and maturity ignores the other aspects of living systems: their death and conception. By incorporating the dimensions of destruction and renewal, the ecocycle model more adequately describes our lived experience.[14]

For the same reasons, traditional planning templates fall short. They help us organize what we know but gloss over what we can't predict. They presume more control than we actually have. They move us quickly through conversation on mission, vision and values to actions rather than holding us in the uncomfortable space between endings and beginnings where renewal is possible. That's why more of us are crafting, learning and rehearsing different stories about the future as part of planning processes these days. We call them scenarios. I like to think of them as multiple Plan Bs.

In the aftermath of the global economic collapse in 2008, the most plausible scenarios for the nonprofit sector described the contraction of resources and the expansion of need for services. One scenario posited the remote possibility of a rescue by government. Another imagined an opportunity in this crisis – the chance to choose strategic collaboration over competition for greater collective impact. It painted a picture of a sector emerging from the financial crisis transformed by a stronger sense of purpose and a deliberate strategy to reap the benefits of diversity.

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[14] I've relied on David Hurst's 1995 book *Crisis and Renewal* to guide me to my understanding of the ecocycle. I've also benefited enormously from several conversations with him about his latest work. See http://www.davidkhurst.com/

This was the fourth steep economic downturn in my career, so I knew better than to bet on the more hopeful scenarios. But I also knew that they were not predictions as much as they were tools for trying on different futures and preparing for any eventuality. I concluded my first paper by naming the ways that I imagined this conversation tapping into the emotional undercurrents running through all four scenarios and serving the sector's long-term interests. This conclusion revealed more about me than it did about the actual trajectory of the recesssion.

I'm a pragmatic idealist. I've been taught that we create the future everyday, consciously or unconciously. At the start of the recession, I chose to take the side of renewal: helping nonprofit leaders and their organizations adapt to new realities without losing their core commitments. We did this work in planning exercises that began with the deepest questions we can ask about our organizations – "who are we and what do we exist to do?" – and ended with "what do we do next?"

I also spent a lot of time talking with mature workers who were suddenly unemployed for the first time in their lives and a few younger workers who were underemployed or simply benched. Very few had received outplacement services or severance packages. Many of them were trying on new vocational identities like consultant or entrepreneur. On a much smaller scale, they were asking the same questions and engaged in the same activities as my clients, but without an income and outside a community.

In a column published by *The Mark* in September 2010, John Stapleton nailed the front half of this problem: "With poverty rising and political control shifting, the economic instability of 2010 is reminiscent of the recession of 1994. Back then, though, we had a secure safety net of social services to cushion the landing." But it is the back half of the problem – the absence of community – that makes landing and rebounding even harder according to job seekers.

So, here's what I've learned.

No book, theory or model can prepare individuals or organizations for the blunt impact of decisions that throw us into an unwelcome ending or for the uncontrollable forces that drive new beginnings. To endure the loss of our plans and to bring about renewal, our sense of purpose has to be hitched to a set of real issues and community found beyond the perimeter of our private or organizational lives.

Further, we have to figure out how to manage leavetakings (known more commonly as layoffs and terminations) better. Minimally, we need to make the supports which are available to private and public sector workers available more widely in the nonprofit sector (e.g. severance, outplacement counseling.) Preserving good collegial relationships where possible should be a higher priority. The introduction of alumni groups within organizations is a promising

sign that we're getting better at this. Fact is, we can no longer afford the collateral social damage created by some conventional human resources practices.

How quickly we recover from setbacks has everything to do with our ability to tell ourselves an old story in a new way. A story of personal significance and of mythic proportions.[15] A story that holds together where we've been, where we are and where we're headed. A story that is simple enough to remember and share.

For job seekers, this new story should help them write new resumes, develop job search strategies and hold their ground in the labour market with confidence. It's not the 90-second elevator pitch that they'll give prospective employers but it will be the five minute pep talk they'll give themselves while they climb the stairs to an interview.

For organizations recovering from a significant loss, this new story should help them sharpen their grant proposals or cases for support. It should effectively position themselves in the marketplace of causes. It's a vaccine against mission drift, protecting what's core and enabling everything else to adapt with the times.

It's been several weeks since I last sat down for a conversation with someone who is voluntarily or involuntarily unemployed, and more than six months since we unveiled the YMCA's new table. As I reflect now on the connection between vocational and organizational renewal, I'm finding sea-faring images particularly helpful.

First, this one from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the women and men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

I'm not sure we can teach yearning but we can make our yearnings known in how we lead our organizations and tell their stories. If we speak with veracity about our work, we can inspire courage in others to do the same. When we take the craft of leadership as seriously as our management credentials, we can build organizations with the capacity to continuously renew themselves.

Second, anthropologist Wade Davis in his 2009 Massey Lectures talks about why ancient wisdom should matter to the modern world. He holds up wayfinding as an example. It's based on a nautical term – dead reckoning. It means we only know where we are by knowing precisely where we have been and how we got here. Our position at any one time is determined solely on the basis of distance and direction traveled since leaving the last known point.

When we find ourselves on uncharted terrain, it may be less important to know where we're going than to understand where we've been and where we are.

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[15] "Myth," said the Greek statesman Solon, "is not about something that never happened. It is about something that happens over and over again."

Stories of earlier voyages are not only a source of inspiration and courage. They provide access to traditional knowledge, tools and practices that may actually help us confront the very real threats to our survival today and secure the future. Wayfinding may be one of those tools that we need to reinvent to help us keep ourselves and our organizations on course.

Third, we cannot expect to navigate unfamiliar waters without support. I'm not convinced that we need to go on special retreats, hire coaches or allocate more financial resources to stay purposeful and vital, but we absolutely need time, space and each other. We also need to get out of our own cultural contexts to gain perspective.

In one of my first formal conversations on vocational renewal, a seasoned environmental leader took me aside and said, "You know, I've stayed connected to my sense of vocation by regularly hanging out in three places: the bus, the bar and the bath. Each place puts me in contact with who and what I need for the journey: my community, my colleagues and myself."

I offered his example to a ballroom filled with charity executives in Belfast, Northern Ireland in the winter of 2010. That particular conference was an excellent example of what's needed to develop habits of mind and heart that prevent isolation and build a collegial community. On the edges of conversations about big and pressing concerns, I encouraged participants to start another – one that reveals more of their own leadership narrative to each other. I hoped they would see it as necessary work although I knew it would feel like a break.

That conference, convened by CO3 (Chief Officers Third Sector) served that purpose for me at the mid-point in this inquiry. Metcalf Foundation President Sandy Houston and I had been invited by CO3's executive director, Majella McCloskey, to have a "funder-practitioner dialgoue" about vocational renewal. The theme was *The Leadership Voyage: Charting the Course for Third Sector Leaders in Challenging Times*. Participants had been promised "space to consider future trends and developments, skills to manage the forthcoming change, and inspiration and passion to lead their organization through change." A valuable opportunity to connect with others who were working in straitened circumstances after the 2008 economic meltdown and absorbing the impact of the 1998 Northern Ireland Peace Accord.

We were in Northern Ireland for seven days. Long enough to form friendships with new colleagues and short enough to know that it would take a lifetime to fully grasp their stories. Separate roundtable conversations with government officials and frontline workers were linked by guided tours by car and foot of neighbourhoods in transition, including housing projects where peace walls once stood and creches on corners where violence had once claimed lives.

The conference opened with a sobering economic outlook from a stoic senior government official. By the time Sandy and I took the podium, participants had their heads deeply into the external demands of their work. Our job was to speak to the internal demands.

After laying the groundwork, Sandy explained what we know about effective leaders: their personal qualities, management abilities, and the qualities accumulated over time and through experience. But he focused on the central theme that ran through our preparatory conversation with ten Canadian colleagues a month or so earlier.

When asked about their leadership resources, they identified the power and quality of their relationships. They returned over and over again to the importance of being connected to others – within and beyond their generations, organizations and fields – for strength, inspiration and support. "The value of being connected and in generative relationships was underscored by the observations of some who noted how taxing, even draining, isolation can be on a leader's resources," Sandy said. "And yet the independence or autonomy and liberty, as one thoughtful leader put it, that come with leadership are also key resources: the ability to set a path, chart a course, and deliver on a crucial mandate."

When it was my turn to speak, I moved us from the value of staying connected to each other to the value of staying connected to ourselves. I hoped they would see this connection as an asset and be motivated to attend to their sense of purpose or vocation as a direct result. Remembering when they first caught a glimpse of it and how it looks in action. Noticing how it has changed over the long arc of their careers. Valuing their own narratives as a renewable leadership resource, mined to inform and inspire positive actions.

I said that if we spend all our time thinking about the issues facing our organizations and sectors, we're at risk of losing ourselves and perspective on our roles. The ground beneath our feet begins to erode. It no longer feels safe to take a stand. We begin to forget what we stand for. Before we know it, all the vitality has been drained from our vocations and we're going through the motions. Just doing a job to earn a paycheck, not advancing a great or noble cause.

I assured them that I didn't think there was anything wrong with a job being just a job and not an all-consuming passion. But I explained that my underlying assumption was that very few of us become nonprofit leaders if that's how we approach our work or workplaces. Our effectiveness is in large part measured by our ability to inspire and encourage many, many others to get to work on often intractable problems. If our stores of hope, trust and courage have been depleted by anxiety, fear or just plain old boredom, it is not likely that anyone

else is going to hear or respond to our calls to action – no matter how well we marshal language, data or other leadership resources.

Renewal then can be about reconnecting the wires that have become frayed or broken over time or from over use so that we can be and see light again – and lead our organizations and communities in new directions. The capacity for renewal, I maintained, is also a leadership asset.

Pausing there, I moved off my text to talk about what's "not wanted on the voyage." Bad weather. Cranky or seasick traveling companions. Pirates. Leaks. Mirages. The failure of navigational instruments. Icebergs. I told them about one Canadian's modern twist on the story of the first time the world ended. In Timothy Findley's 1984 novel about the Great Flood described in the Book of Genesis, an irritable and ill-tempered Noah is pitted against an old, depressed and slightly senile God. Noah's poorly conceived plan for survival holds everyone hostage on what one book reviewer called "an elaborate piece of driftwood."

I explained that the passage puts the work of renewal into a context that is shared by third sector leaders around the world in very different social, economic and political circumstances – and one that I too know well from my own leadership story. It reminds us that it appears to begin with a fiasco that feels as final as death.

"...with every new manoeuvre, the light was growing dimmer ... fading by numbers as well as strength ... and the sound could no longer be heard, but only the pulse of it ... seen going out in the darkness losing its edges ... caving in at its centre ... webbing, now, as if a spider was spinning against the rain ... until the last few strands of brightness fell ... and were extinguished ... silenced and removed from life and from all that lives forever. And the bell tolled – but the ark, as ever, was adamant. Its shape had taken on a voice. And the voice said: no."

When I heard my own voice say no in that instant I felt the full weight of it in my own life and in the lives of those in the audience. I became adamant. No to the end of the story. No to the end of life. No to the end of the dream. From what I had witnessed in the days leading up to the conference, I knew that they were adamant too, busy building arks in defiance of dire evidence and predictions. Their arks voiced convictions and hopes that were not stopping the waters from rising but were keeping many afloat during this latest economic crisis. It was obviously not the first time that the world as we knew it was coming to an end, nor would it be the last time.

Leaving that "no" hanging heavily in the air, Sandy took the microphone to explain the Metcalf Foundation Renewal Program – a practical program

designed to help nonprofit leaders fan the flame before it goes out or find their way in the dark.[16] The foundation had recently remodeled the program to make more resources available for activities aimed at renewal for individuals and their organizations, including acquiring or honing skills, accessing research, investigating new models, studying with experts, faciltiating dialogue with peers across traditional boundaries, stimulating creativity or reflecting on experience and practice. This new funding focus brought an end to Metcalf's popular sabbatical program which gave a few mid-career professionals each year the chance to take some significant time off.

When the new program was launched a month earlier, I sized it up as the next iteration of a strong program not an improvement on a weak one. The changes were aimed at maintaining relevance and increasing impact in a sector undergoing significant change. It carefully balances professional and organizational interests, different learning styles and sources of knowledge. It puts the onus of responsibility for renewal on the leader, recognizing that this kind of professional development must always be voluntary and never a requirement of our employment. Readiness and safety matters.

I expected that the loss of the chance to experience a sabbatical would disappoint some of us. In the first year of these conversations on renewal, a few receipients of Metcalf's sabbatical grants had shared with me their stories about the transformational power of that gift. This is what one of them wrote about the experience:

"... space to think and time to change affords us the opportunity to evolve as a professional within the context of our work without being in the muddled and frenzied trenches of everyday obligations and responsibilities. And not just evolve as a natural act of moving forward, of stepping into the next footprint in front of you. But evolve with a much more deliberate spirit in well-considered unfettered new directions. We stand still. We take it in. We let new opportunities present themselves. We sit with our intentions. We make a considered decision about which way to go. This is applicable to both our own personal futures and, equally important, to the evolution of our work ..."

However, the elimination of the sabbatical option said more about lean times than about the efficacy of sabbaticals as a renewal strategy. We're challenged today to bring about "creative disruptions" without leaving our jobs or homes for extended periods of time. For me, a week in Northern Ireland took on features of a sabbatical eventhough I was not unplugged. I had also found that an old-fashioned coffee break can be useful when it is dedicated to taking turns

[16] See http://metcalffoundation.com/what-we-fund/renewal-program/

listening and talking about work and vocation with a peer. We can't afford to lose the activity at the core of a sabbatical – standing still in the light of whatever you love deeply – but there is more than one way to pause. I believe that the foundation's renewal program invites us to discover more of them.

Sandy wrapped up his review of the program and his part of the presentation with former Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel's take on the crises facing the Obama administration in the run up to the inauguration in 2009. "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste," Emanuel explained in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. "And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before." Sandy invited the audience to rethink what is needed most and not to fall into the trap of trying to do more with less.

"On the question of innovation, I think it is fair to say that the current circumstances bring into even higher relief that the old ways of doing things are likely unable to adequately meet our current challenges. Consequently, there's never been a greater time to create opportunities within the sector for creativity, innovation, and adaptability. We know we can't solve hard old problems using the same old methods. We know we are required to change. One of the things we as the sector needs to do is consciously create the opportunities for the changes to come about, giving leaders opportunities for reflection, for repurposing and reengagement," he concluded.

I closed with Barbara Kingsolver's description of another adamant ark – a house on dry land – with a voice that also says no but, with its very next breath, says yes. A resounding yes. In this passage, I hear an echo of the hope that I felt in the presence of these sensible, hard-working Northern Irish leaders and the hope that they had rekindled in me:

"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. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can't say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it. Right now I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides."

I flew home from Belfast to Banff where I participated in a forum of YMCA chief executives from across the country. The forum was followed by a leadership development program led by Hugh O'Doherty, a professor from Harvard who coincidentially happened to be from Derry, Northern Ireland, and had played a mediation role in the peace process. While my colleagues discussed their challenges and commitments, my mind wandered back to a 1996 study called *Common Fire* by another Harvard professor, Sharon Daloz Parks,

and three colleagues.[17] They interviewed a large sample of individuals to examine how we become committed to the common good and sustain such commitments as the world changes. They maintain that the process has to do with transforming the meaning of "home." Life is usually thought of as a voyage or journey, a series of passages from infancy to childhood to adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life, maturity and old age as well as a sequence of departures and arrivals from a place that feels like home—literally and figuratively.

While we do leave people, relationships and more behind as we leave home, more often everything is transformed.

"It is closer to the truth to say that over time some parts of us remain constant and some change … We never leave home entirely behind. We grow and become both by letting go and holding on, leaving and staying, journeying and abiding. A good life is a balance of home and pilgrimage …The growth of self may be understood less as a journey and more as a series of transformations in the meaning of home. With each transformation, the boundary shifts outward to embrace the neighbourhood, the community, the society and perhaps ultimately the world."

Returning to the YMCA for one more tour of duty and to Canada after a short visit to the first home of my immigrant relatives helped me notice just how many times I've left "home" and returned a different person. Every arrival has depended on a departure and my willingness to go a little farther each time.

[17] Sharon's co-researchers were Laurent Parks Daloz, Cheryl Keen and James Keen.

III. Civic Renewal

In 2007 the world was getting to know Barack Obama—a relatively new face in American politics and a candidate for President of the United States. Before he told us his record or his stand on the critical issues of the day, he told us his story: what summoned him from the private practice of law into a public life of service, what he valued about his country and its citizens, and what challenges and choices they faced at that moment in history. Through a near perfect combination of new technology and grassroots campaigning, Barack Obama mobilized over a million volunteers for a historic campaign. But before any one of them hit the phones or started knocking on doors, they were required to participate in a three-day training session during which they too told their stories and wove them into a larger one.

A chance encounter with two campaign workers—a former state senator and a recent college graduate—in an Irish pub in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania gave me a close look at this "ground strategy." The way they talked with my friends who were die-hard Clinton supporters convinced me that this campaign was different and had the potential to change the practice of politics. While standing at our table, they told a story about themselves, what the campaign was about, and why the country needed a new President.

Obama's chief community organizer was Marshall Ganz whose command of the moral and emotional dimensions of politics fascinated me. Ganz's story takes him from a small California town to Harvard and then a year before graduation into the Farm Workers campaign led by César Chavez. He ultimately returned to Harvard, earned his Ph.D. and now teaches organizing at the Kennedy School of Government.

He argues that values, intentions and narratives are the substance of social change work.[18] Only then can our time and money have a serious impact on the issues. The stories and the assumptions buried within them are the bases for what the *New Yorker*'s Malcolm Gladwell calls "strong-tie connections" and social relationships that have the power to transform society at every level.[19]

Ganz takes his inspiration from the 1st century Jewish religious leader Rabbi Hillel who is best known for three questions: "If I am not for myself, who will be? And if I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?" These questions are rooted in an ethic of reciprocity, the universal notion of the Golden Rule. Ganz translates them into "the story of self," "the story of us," and "the story of now." These stories provide a purposeful frame for society into which

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[18] "Stories not only teach us how to act – they inspire us *to* act. Stories communicate our values through the language of the heart, our emotions. And it is what we *feel* – our hopes, our cares, our obligations – not simply what we *know* that can inspire us with the courage to act." Marshall Ganz from *Telling Your Public Story: Self, Us, Now* (2007)

[19] See Malcolm Gladwell's October 4th, 2010 article in the *New Yorker* called "Small Change."

each generation can place its own picture. It is this picture that speaks to citizens viscerally, removes our inhibitions, mobilizes us, and keeps us engaged even when the hard work feels endless.

I see signs that we're working with this frame to bring about civic renewal in my city and across the country too:

- Steve Paikin and the *TVO Agenda* team are reengaging citizens in conversation about the issues that affect them through day-long AgendaCamps across the province
- Nick Saul and *The Stop Community Food Centre* have reinvented the notion of the food bank as a convivial neighbourhood centre in beautifully redeveloped transit repair barns and a part of the West End community
- Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan of *Samara* are working on restoring trust and rebuilding the relationship between citizens and their democratic institutions and representatives
- Peter McLeod and the *MASS LBP* crew are reimagining public consultation and tools for citizen participation in the work of policy development
- Jamie Biggar and Adam Shedletzky of *LeadNow* are mobilizing a new generation of voters to move their issues and aspirations forward
- Mary McGrath and Ruth Richardson of *The Small Change Fund* are growing citizen philanthropists and grassroots environmental projects
- Helen Walsh and *Diaspora Dialogues* are bringing the voices of immigrant writers into the public discourse
- Andy MacCaulay, Anne Sutherland and Beth Thompson of *Citizen Capitalism* are reconnecting citizens with the power to effect social change through their daily choices
- The *Ontario Nonprofit Network*, its steering committee and staff are renewing the capacity of the nonprofit sector to collaborate and contribute to the public policy development process

Guided by clearheaded visions, these individuals have taken on the task of building capacity to inspire citizens—across traditional divides—to work together for the common good. Each one has a story to tell about how they found their way to this work at this time in their lives. In each story, there is something that hooks mine and makes me want to get involved.

The dominant narrative in the nonprofit sector, however, has not changed much despite this good work and many other encouraging initiatives. In it, nonprofit organizations are purveyors of goods and services not promising solutions to tough problems. It describes volunteers as helpmates for staff members, not as engaged citizens. It differentiates major philanthropic gifts from minor ones by size, not sacrifice or impact. It promises to deliver specific,

measurable outcomes at the expense of the people doing the actual work if necessary. It remains silent on the personal price paid by innovators in bringing new ideas to scale or making old ones new again.

I don't know when we started talking about our sector's common purpose as raising money and recruiting volunteers to provide programs and services. Maybe it was around the same time as we stopped talking about our common purpose as a country as "peace, order and good government." Maybe it was around the same time we stopped seeing ourselves as members of a group, organization, community or the body politic and started calling ourselves taxpayers and customers.[20] Maybe it was when we started demanding the return of our "hard-earned tax dollars" through credits, rebates and services that benefit only those who deserve them instead of participating in processes to set a civic agenda. Or maybe it was when we lost our patience with big tents and took refuge in increasingly smaller ones where our worldviews, politics and comfort levels would not be challenged by the experience and example of others.

It seems to me that the capacity of citizens to challenge the status quo or make change shrunk considerably when we stopped thinking of political parties as part of civil society and started thinking of them as small cliques of governments or governments-in-waiting. Many of us no longer have a front row seat on politics where we can engage the issues, take on different roles in the political process and experience its tensions and rewards. We've become unplugged from a significant source of power to critique the way things are and to envision the way things could be.

There is no evidence that political parties and nonprofit organizations are asleep at the switch. They have comprehensive plans powered by high tech tools to recruit volunteers, cultivate donors and build social networks. But I can't help but wonder if this approach lacks the balance between the high tech and high touch strategies that made the Obama campaign historic. Is it more likely to reinforce differences in wealth, status and interest than bind us into a powerful, common agenda?

I wonder if civil society and the space it occupies in our national imagination has been fundamentally changed by cultural shifts in favour of a *well-planned* society— one in which representatives of every sector talk and walk in the same way. I wonder if too many of us have forgotten how to recognize, issue or act on a *summons*.[21] I wonder how many feel there is simply no time or space for anything other than holding tightly to the cliff and trying not to look down. I

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[20] Susan Delacourt and Don Lenihan have published an excellent article in *Policy Options* (December 2010-January 2011) that explores this notion of consumerism in relationship to citizenship in Canadian politics.

[21] Another nod to David Brooks' article in the *New York Times* from August, 2010, called "The Summoned Life."

wonder what role nonprofit organizations and their leaders might usefully play in the wholesale renewal of civic life.

A citizenship ceremony on a rainy September morning in downtown Toronto gave me my first clue as to what that role ought to be in a time often described as polarized, cynical and fearful.

There were about 150 people in the Court of Canadian Citizenship that day. Half of us were there to take the oath and the other half were witnesses and supporters like me. I was one of a small group of friends invited by an American and her partner to share the experience.

The new citizens from 25 different countries were processed in an orderly and efficient manner thanks to careful bureaucratic preparations and clear instructions. Two short videos offered panoramic views of this beautiful, diverse and complicated country of ours, emphasizing its promise of hope, freedom and opportunity. The citizenship judge, a retired educator and member of the Order of Canada, dignified the occasion with thoughtful remarks and a welcoming handshake. Somewhere near the beginning of his speech, he made a quick reference to what Canadian citizens do. He said we help, understand and respect each other. Help. Understand. Respect. These three words stuck with me even as we filed out of the court into a neighbourhood restaurant for a celebratory brunch and then returned to our homes and offices.

I thought about my own life. All the ways in which I have been helped by citizens acting en masse—and hurt by them. I counted the tools that have been available to help me understand people, systems and structures—and those that have been unavailable to me. I remembered the places and spaces where I have encountered perspectives and experiences different from my own and have walked away with a new-found or deeper respect—and have rejected them outright or dismissed them. I also took stock of how I have helped or hurt, enabled learning or hoarded knowledge, and respected or rejected. I was left wondering what else citizens do and what it might mean if everyone did these constructive and destructive things habitually.

Since then, I've been asking my friends and colleagues what they think citizens do (other than vote and pay taxes) and if they've been doing this work lately. Who or what first summoned them to "go public"? When was the last time they took action as a group of citizens and for what purpose? What was that like for them? What was the result? Would they do it again? If not, what might be stopping them?

I've been thinking about what makes civic space hospitable to questions like these. Coffee shops have a storied place in history and are enjoying a renaissance in many cities today. Faith communities have built their churches, temples, mosques and synagogues to serve this purpose within civil society. But in a secular time and a pluralist place, there is a persistent need for conversation

that reaches beyond these traditional spaces. I hear many people longing for simple and open space into which everyone can bring their colourful and textured identities, personalities and stories. A space that invites them to speak what educator and activist Parker Palmer calls "vulnerable, challenging and transforming truths," to make meaning, to experience some measure of healing, to feel a sense of belonging, and to give voice to their visions for themselves and society.

Palmer puts it this way. We know a lot about how to create spaces that invite the intellect to show up, analyzing reality, parsing logic, and arguing a case. We know a little about creating spaces that invite emotions into play, reacting to injury, expressing anger, and celebrating joy. We are experts at creating spaces that invite the ego to put in an appearance, to advance its image, to protect its turf, and to demand its rights. But we seem to know much less about creating spaces that inspire or summon citizens.[22]

These times are summoning nonprofit organizations tand their leaders o possess this knowledge and to more deliberately create such spaces within civil society. Given their trusted role within communities and core purpose, they are positioned to step into the gap created by the politics of division and to take what they learn there into the space designated for public policy dialogue.

However, if Canada's public policy space keeps getting smaller, we will remain gridlocked by narrow agendas that produce greater inequity in "hope, freedom and opportunity" and break the first promise we make to new Canadians even before the ink is dry on their certificates.

Everything is changing. Canada's geographic, cultural and conceptual boundaries are being redrawn, its economic engines rebuilt, and its political frames reconstructed. I for one have predictions, just a response to these circumstances. To stay in conversation with neighbours and co-workers from different backgrounds and perspectives – especially when we discover that we disagree – to learn their stories and how they came to their beliefs.

Denise Chong, an economist who wrote *The Concubine's Children* and won the 1994 Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction, has inspired me to respond this way:

"To speak with authenticity and veracity is to choose narrative over commentary … I believe our stories ultimately tell the story of Canada itself. In all our pasts are an immigrant beginning, a settler's accomplishments and setbacks, and the confidence of a common future. We all know the struggle for victory, the dreams and the lost hopes, the pride and the shame. When we tell

[22] Parker J. Palmer refers to the need for trustworthy spaces in his 2003 book called *A Hidden Wholeness: A Journey to the Undivided Self* (2004)

our stories, we look in the mirror. I believe what we will see is that Canada is not lacking in heroes. Rather, the heroes are to be found within."

Who we see in Canada's mirror says a lot about how we see ourselves. Seeing heroes begins with valuing our individual and collective stories. It includes sharing those stories as well as our ideas and positions. It means creating the kinds of spaces outside the rhythms and routines of daily life in which they can be offered, received and digested over the course of our lives. Until then, we will likely see only right and left, urbanites and suburbanites, foreign workers and Canadian workers, the elites and working people, cyclists and drivers, taxpayers and bureaucrats, consumers and marketers, the 1% and the 99%.

If I could, I would bring home for dinner everyone who saw each other and themselves in these camps. While conversations about "scaling up" are popular in the nonprofit sector today, I believe that this is the scale at which most of us will become reengaged and live out our common vocation as citizens.

Surely this conversation needs many homes, including mine, but does it also need a civic home?

In the fall of 2010, I became preoccupied with this question and started piecing together a response. The first piece came from two progressive religious writers who put what I know to be true into words.

"To thrive, hope requires a home, a sustaining structure of community, meaning and ritual. Only with such a habitation can hope manifest the spiritual stamina it needs …"[23]

Although churches, temples, synagogues and mosques see themselves as homes for hope, I'm not convinced that they have ever been the only ones we need. I decided to take my conversations on vocational, organizational and civic renewal into a variety of non-religious spaces. I chose instead what I think of as radically hospitable space without the marks or symbols of any faith tradition, a blank canvas upon which every individual can leave the shape and texture of their own beliefs, stories, traditions, and aspirations. My choices were not a rejection of religious organizations and their role as hosts of vocational and civic conversations. They were are reflection of my interest in work and spaces that keep our focus on this dimension of our lives.

I took special care to choose beautiful spaces with access to natural elements and works of art. I also limited myself to urban spaces given demands on the nonprofit leaders' time and money. My views on the space that is conducive to reflective practice were informed by several tests in different seasons and an

[23] From a *House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion in the Twenty-First Century* by John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker (2010)

ongoing conversation with Constance Exley who specializes in helping nonprofits create more productive, inspiring and healthy workspaces. From taking a close look at her office and mine, we began to formulate a picture of the ideal environment for this work.

However, until I read an article in *The Globe and Mail* about a unique Cabbagetown home last autumn, I really didn't believe such a space existed. This house was for sale. It had belonged for over 30 years to Barrie Chavel, a long-time city employee, tireless community activist and single mother of two young men.

Upon her death in 2009, Barrie was described by then Mayor David Miller as "a huge personality, funny, charming, tough. She could make things work. She was the epitome of a civil servant." By all accounts, she was also the consummate host who regularly convened dinners and parties in aid of good causes. Her favourite was social housing. She was known as the neighbour who would shovel the sidewalks at dawn, take coffee to kids sleeping on Church Street on the morning after the annual Pride parade, and never locked her door. Her door was open to friends who needed a place to stay while in transition and also to the letter carrier who could be occasionally caught napping on her couch late in the afternoon.

After viewing this storied house with my realtor Elspeth Sinclair, I wondered if the work of continuously building and rebuilding the city's civic leadership capacity needed an actual home. Not a sterile boardroom, dark church basement, occasional classroom, or remote retreat centre, but an intimate, gracious and homey urban space that could support work on vocational, organizational and civic renewal—the work of reflection, dialogue, planning and relationship building.

Built in 1887, 1 and 3 Alpha Avenue was originally two townhouses. It is situated immediately north of Wellesley, west of Sackville and directly south of St. James Cemetery. A graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design, Barrie turned these two houses into one 'neighbourhood house' by taking down a few walls – a place for people to meet, conspire, create, celebrate and learn. She chose to repurpose salvaged materials and remade her house into a unique work of art long before recycling was in vogue. For example, a headstone from a child's grave circa 1880 became part of the patio and a manhole cover from the city's original sewage system was preserved in the dining room floor. Over three decades, it became a stage for rallying and organizing responses to community issues. I imagined it continuing to serve this purpose but set within an even larger vision.

I saw 1 and 3 Alpha Avenue as the newest face of urban renewal. An addition to the city's social purpose real estate portfolio. Its modest size would make it possible for individuals and small groups to come to the edges of their

workplaces for a change in perspective and pace, and to return ready for the next round of challenges – without ever leaving the city. It could be the centre for programs, services and counsel related to vocational, organizational and civic renewal. A base for a small consortium of social purpose businesses perhaps. I imagined three established sole practitioners working independently and collaboratively at the house as partners and curators.

I envisioned five meeting spaces (two with fireplaces and three suitable for sit-down meals) being offered for rent as convening space. Two bedrooms would be available for hosting out-of-town guests and for occasional residents, including individuals on sabbatical or engaged in writing projects. I imagined a graduate student living there full-time as their host.

I thought about creating an annual membership offering to build a network of associates committed to civic renewal. They would use the house to advance their own work and to connect with others. I imagined building an online community for a multi-directional flow of ideas, information and experience related to renewal in all its dimensions. I pictured using the house as the organizing platform for other community building initiatives as issues and opportunities arise.

Knowing that I was not in a position to buy or finance a $1 million property, all that I could do was put the vision out there. How I did that and what came back to me has taught me a lot about the last stage in the renewal process – conception – and the fragility of new ideas.

There is one lesson that stands out.

I quickly became preoccupied with the financial resources needed to pilot this idea. Anyone who has bought a house knows that the process is designed to create urgency and competition. Anxiety is a natural by-product. It's contagious. I became an unwitting carrier and shifted too quickly from the vision to its implementation before it had the chance to serve its purpose: to call us to the cause of civic renewal.

I might have focused less on how to make it happen through a series of one-on-one exchanges and more on how to curate a bigger conversation about civic renewal. I might have then taken whatever emerged from the discussion – a better understanding of the problem, a clear picture of current responses, other good ideas, whatever – forward. The Electric Company's artistic director Kim Collier shares her experience into the creative process in her brilliant 2010 Siminovitch Prize for Theatre Direction speech:

"It has always seemed natural to me that together we are stronger. This has been a great source of motivation for me. It has been my experience that we can effect profound change within this community simply by having a vision and

inviting others to join in the vision and then allowing the vision to belong to everyone."

By becoming attached to the outcome of buying the house, I didn't give the problem or vision enough air or space. I suffocated it in my rush to give it life. Six months after my first visit and on the cusp of spring, the house was purchased by someone else whose own vision for it was ready to be born.

I kicked myself around for a while, disappointed that I had forgotten how real things grow. Only then was I able to take stock of what I had gained from the experience – and I'm not finished yet.

An appreciation for the underutilized spaces we do have for conversations on vocational, organizational and civic renewal in the city. Gratitude for the many people who graciously entertained my enthusiasm, shared their contacts and advice, and cheered me on in the belief that I was onto something. Gratitude also for unvarnished feedback on my wobbly business model delivered without using words like "dumb" or "ridiculous." Insight into the complexities of owning, developing and maintaining social purpose real estate. A feel for what transforms a private house into a community home. The start of a friendship with Barrie's son James Chavel and his family. Satisfaction that I had erred on the side of taking action rather than staying in the safe world of fine talk and pretty prose. A growing awareness that the work of civic renewal is urgent and is calling all of us to rediscover how citizens – not volunteers, consumers or taxpayers – behave.

My vision morphed several times during this dialogue with confidantes before it landed firmly on the ground. My attitude now is that I'll pitch a tent wherever it's needed and welcomed. I continue to be interested in the inner space needed for renewal as much as the outer space. I occasionally feel twinges of longing for a permanent home for my persistent and emerging questions about leaders, communities and civic life. If it's ever fulfilled, we'll have Barrie Chavel to thank. I realize now that I long to resurrect some of her story in my own life and in the wider community – not to recreate her house.

With the release of this paper, I'll be taking a leap into cyberspace to see if we might create a virtual home for good conversation on work and vocation in our lives, organizations and society. A colleague sent these verses by Ulrich Shaffer to me around the same time as I began contemplating redirecting my hopes for 1 and 3 Alpha Avenue toward *onealphaavenue.org*. They come from his book, *Growing into the Blue*:

All growing is changing
from one state to another.
Leaving a world behind,
entering the fear of the unaccustomed:

of colours that don't blend,
of holy words that jar,
of fractures that give rise to visions.

We have left one realm
but we have not arrived at the other.
We have given up one safety
but not gained another.
Above the gazing crowd
the trapeze artist lets go of his swing,
and then, if his timing is right,
seizes another swing,
without asking time to stop for him.
That is the flight into growth.

That is the changeover
in which we experience our nakedness
to the point of hurting.
But there is not real growth without leaping,
without burning bridges
and standing wide-eyed and shivering
on a new shore.

And yet
without growth
there is nothing.

Convening a Dark Horse Conversation

Just in case you've forgotten, a coffee break is an opportunity to stop working. However, the practice began in the 1880s when women who worked in a tobacco warehouse were allowed to go home twice a day to check on their children. More than a century later, most of us continue to be inveterate multi-taskers who are more likely to use any free time running errands not klatching over coffee.

Although the coffee break is no longer a revolutionary idea, it has become a revolutionary act to take one – away from our desks and with colleagues. A radical feature of my Metcalf Foundation Innovation Fellowship was that it enabled me to schedule coffee dates regularly with anyone who was carrying a vocational question and to meet them in a variety of settings. Many cups of coffee later, I've realized that carving out an hour on the edge of our workplaces can feel as challenging as going on an overnight retreat or taking a vacation. It is, however, a place to start.

I'm not calling for a return to the now ancient practice of daily 15-minute coffee breaks but rather a reinvention of it. I'd like to see time accumulated intentionally and then spent (at least once a year and ideally three or four times a year) on a Dark Horse Conversation, one centred on vocation – yours, mine and ours – with colleagues who are not necessarily co-workers in the same workplace. Not the usual gossiping and grousing but instead taking turns telling our stories and asking questions to dig out what matters to us and where we're headed.

From what I've experienced, this kind of coffee break depends on:

One or more people you trust. It is taken with as many people from varied backgrounds as you'd like as long as you begin with sufficient trust or take steps to build it. Hospitality, practiced in its purest form, builds trust. A warm welcome. An invitation to participate, never a demand. A willingness to listen, suspend judgment and – as Parker Palmer has taught me – refrain from trying to fix, save, advise or set each other straight. A commitment to leave what has been said on the table with the dishes when you get up to leave. When a group practices hospitality, it becomes trustworthy and nothing less than a trusted cohort of peers can sustain us in all our endeavours.

A setting you find beautiful. It is taken in a place where you feel able to breathe and relax. What each of us finds comfortable and peaceful is as different as we are but we share a need to get out of the office for reasons other than meetings. I've had the privilege of having these conversations in every

imaginable setting, including Toronto's best indie coffee shops like the Dark Horse Espresso Bar, the Quaker Meeting House's light-filled solarium, and Massey College's serene chapel, storied upper library and gracious dining room. I've also had them on "walk and talks" through the ravines and along Lake Ontario. When meeting with more than one person, I prefer a setting where I can set the chairs in a circle with no barrier between others and me.

An open, honest question. A questions is not open and honest when it conveys advice, opinions or an expectation, like "have you ever thought of it this way …?" Concerning vocation, the most helpful questions are those that follow the thread of our own stories into unexplored territory. They arise from genuine curiousity about who is in front of you and what they've just said as well as where they've been and what they're doing now. They can also arise from something outside of your story or mine – a "third thing" that speaks to a universal human experience. Parker Palmer coined this phrase to describe conversation starters like art in all its forms, poetry, song lyrics, short essays or quotes. The most useful third things tell the truth indirectly, in the manner of metaphors, and make it possible for our truths to emerge at a pace and depth that is appropriate for us.

Choosing just the right conversation starter for the people, place and time is not as much an art form as it is the result of paying attention to culture – the language, symbols, rituals and practices that hold meaning for us and those around us.

Like any good book club, each group – even if it's a group of two – finds its own way into each story and takes away what it needs in that moment. And just in case you're thinking this kind of dialogue is a luxury at its best and a waste of time at its worst, think again. This is what Margaret Wheatley, a serious management expert with global credentials, has to say about it:

"Conversation is the way that humans have always thought together … Even in the corridors of power, very little real action happens in debate, but rather in the side rooms, the hallways, the lunches, the times away from the ritual spaces of authority and in the relaxed spaces of being human. … These are not "soft" processes. This is how wars get started and how wars end. It is how money is made, lives started, freedom realized."[24]

[24] From *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the World* (2002)

Will an hour spent turning inward to express our evolving sense of purpose lead us to spend an hour thinking about the inner, less visible workings of our organizations? From there, might we be better equipped to turn outward and see what unifies our diverse individual and collective experiences within society? I know it can and hope you do too.

Postscript

Shortly after the 2011 federal election in May, I realized that this paper would be incomplete without some reference to the stunning realignment of the political landscape – the culmination of a long renewal process for the Conservative Party, the maturing of the New Democratic Party into the Official Opposition, and the near-collapse of the Liberal Party. In a sudden reversal of fortunes, NDP Leader Jack Layton withdrew from public life to fight a new cancer in July. A month later, he died.

When the future dissolves "like salt in a weakened broth," our knowledge of the ecocycle is cold comfort.[25] It may tell us that a fragile opportunity is buried in the ruins of our plans but our imaginations are stretched to believe it. At moments like this, we realize that the dark horse is actually the safest bet of all. Reflective conversations make grievous losses bearable. They make us more resilient. They give us trusted colleagues with whom we can find humour, wisdom and even joy in all of it – at least eventually. As you know, this has been my experience.

I'm grateful for Jack Layton's final letter – the conversation starter that he dropped into our civic circles and public squares before he laid down his work for good. I picture him striking this task off his "to do" list at the close of his final meeting with his partner and co-workers, openly defying the myth that work won't matter when we're on our death beds. If work has mattered to you in life, I imagine it still matters when you're on the edge between life and death, especially if your family, friends and colleagues share your zeal and belief in its value.

I appreciated the civility of Jack's political rivals how they received his letter and used it to reflect on why they had entered public life and what they're bringing to our common work. The strength of the letter was that it told us what Jack believed. We could agree or disagree, read between the lines, fill in the blanks and find our own meaning in it. It helped us turn inward to discover or confirm what we believe and move forward from this place of deeper understanding. The challenge will always be to narrow the distance between what we believe and what we do, and to keep working that gap with as much grace and humour until we too lay down our work for good.

[25] From a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye called Kindness.

After that, we have very little control over what happens to our work. How it gets explained. What sticks in peoples' minds and what fades away. Which work relationships break and which ones get stronger. Who picks our work up and runs with it. So we better make sure that we leave a few good stories behind.[26]

The story that I'm taking from Jack's life and death is this: Do good work. Persevere. Work well with others. If you do, you'll be missed and remembered. Your work will continue in ways you can't imagine.

Jack's "story of self, story of us, story of now" was told in moving words and music at the state funeral, but it was the mass reclamation of civic space to express powerful emotions and aspirations – individually and collectively – that actually sent me back to work with more determination. Mine was not a universal response. Several friends and co-workers were puzzled by this style of public mourning. Some were visibly uncomfortable, suspicious that it was orchestrated and manipulated by political players for partisan ends.

I realized then that we didn't need to share the same analysis for the event to serve similar purposes in our lives: to help us clarify what we believe, recommit to being the change we want, get to know each other better, and stay engaged in civic life.

And if we can learn to listen to a full range of perspectives without rushing to judgment, we may find a way out of the deep trenches we've dug around ourselves and the people who think like us. I don't think we can or should get over all our differences, but just maybe we can get under them to touch what we have in common long enough to make a little progress from time to time.

In the dying days of summer, I caught a glimpse of how hope looks when it's dressed for the real work of civic renewal – and a glimpse from time to time is all that I've ever really needed to keep going.

Sincerely,

Pat Thompson

[26] In the weeks after my sister died, our family set up a memorial fund called *Susan's Change Purse*. We decided to focus on what she lived for, not what she died from – to honour her vocation and to continue her good work. I can see now that my sense of vocation led me to respond to her death in this way. See http://smallchangefund.org/projects/live-learn-and-lead-the-eastwood-food-project/

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The Master of Massey College John Fraser and his staff received me and my work very warmly. They are masters of hospitality and provided "a sustaining structure of community, meaning and ritual" to keep this inquiry on the right track. Junior and Senior Fellows, Journalism Fellows, Senior Residents, Quadranglers and other Visiting Scholars alike, graciously entertained my questions about their work and listened to me talk about mine. I'm grateful to them all.

I must, however, single out one Senior Fellow in particular for playing a leading role in this project. Dr. Christopher Lind helped me hold onto the thread when I was at risk of dropping it. By word and example, he's taught me more than I can say.

Joy Connelly, John Elliott, Dale Hildebrand and Maylanne Maybee became a base community for this project. Our seasonal conversations were the stillpoint in the turning wheel. Richard Bailey made sure the wheel eventually came to a stop long enough to get my thoughts down on paper. He also pointed me in the direction of some great indie coffee houses and helped me review them too. I want to thank each of them for their friendship and valuable contributions to this work.

Andrea Prazmowski and Janet Ross provided excellent editorial support under serious time pressure. While any errors, omissions and awkward passages are my responsibility, the list is a lot shorter than it would have been without them. They are gifted, insightful and generous colleagues.

I owe my greatest debt of gratitude to my husband John Brewin for all the car trips and dog walks spent wrestling with these ideas. His good humour, positive outlook and superb summaries of current and historical political events are staples in my life.

Finally, the memory of my sister Susan Thompson Pinsonneault – her life and death – has been my constant companion as I wrote this paper. I dedicate it to her to honour what she continues to teach me about our collective need for meaning, healing, belonging and good work.

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