

Keynote Speech for Open University, June, 2008

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I am very grateful to have this chance to share some of the thoughts I have been developing over the six months of my residency on this topic of citizen engagement and movement building as a force for social transformation. I want to look at this topic from the point of view of the nonprofit sector. And in the beginning I want to say that I believe keynotes are supposed to be provocative—to provoke conversation over the next several days. So I don't expect you to agree with me on every point—disagreement is healthy.

Let me start by telling you a little bit about how I came to be here as the Resident Resource Person at the Institute. I first came to Montreal and to the Summer Program about 14 years ago and have come almost every year primarily to teach fundraising. I have been in fundraising for 32 years, and so almost half of that time I have been influenced by what I have learned here every summer. During these past fourteen years, when I wasn't in Montreal, I was teaching, consulting and writing about fundraising. During most of those years, and for most of the years before I started coming here, I was completely confident that if the small nonprofits I worked with did what I said they would raise money. I had ample evidence that this was the case. But starting in the mid-90's, I began to see organizations that were running their fundraising programs almost flawlessly, yet they were not able to raise the money they needed. Plus the chances of running a program flawlessly

were slim. So those organizations that had any internal conflict, or tried something creative which failed, were really not able to raise money. The devolution of government is of course much further along in the USA than here in Canada, and it is fascinating to come here and experience what it is like to be with people who expect their government to do its job, and who have a fairly well developed sense of what that job is. But even here, we seen cutbacks and changes in government policy that are threatening to swamp social service agencies or take much of strength out of existing arts and culture programs. I worked with a large number and variety of social change nonprofits while I was here, and all were experiencing cutbacks or no increases in funding from both the government and private sources. Yet they were expected to handle more and requests for service, to pay higher and higher rent and other costs. Being asked to do more and more with less and less is an all too familiar feeling.

So this led me, a fundraiser, to be very interested in taxes. What is the role of taxes? What should be taxed? Who or what should pay taxes and how much should they pay? One summer here I tried out the idea that taxes should be a part of fundraising and those of us in fundraising must take this seriously. This went well, and so I went back to the USA and began developing workshops to help people understand taxes, and to help people think taxes were interesting. Those who favor lower taxes always maintain that the private sector—corporations, foundations and individuals, will make up for these cuts. But it is abundantly clear and has been demonstrated over and over that the cutbacks in government spending cannot, and should not, be made up by the private sector.

But thinking about public money and private money inevitably leads to thinking about an even bigger concept, which is that the most important

assets we own are collective and social in nature. Our most valuable wealth we must hold in common. Water, oceans and wildlife as well as libraries, parks, museums, access to high quality education are community resources which must be actively protected and managed for the good of all. They must be treasured and passed on, undiminished, to future generations. These things are variously called our common wealth, the commons, the common good. Learning to see and understand the dozens of commons in our midst is one of the preeminent challenges of our time, as David Bollier notes. And it was my experience here in Montreal that the culture of this city, this province, was one that inherently valued the commons, and where people would go to some lengths to protect and enhance the public good. So I wanted to come here for a longer time and experience all of this in more depth, and have some time to expand these ideas, read more and reflect more.

I'd like to return to the title of the speech and look at some definitions.
Citizen Engagement and Movement Building as a Force for Social Transformation

I resisted the word 'citizen' when we were first giving the speech a title. In the USA, the racist and anti-immigration forces have seized this word and use it to define an "us and them" reality. "Us" who belong in the United States because we were born there, and "them" who do not belong and are not wanted except as a source of cheap and exploited labor. Many nonprofit organizations which had the word citizen in their name (Citizens for Justice, Citizens for a Better Environment) have changed it to "community" or "people." But my colleagues here helped me realize that you really should not give away good words to the other side. And citizen is such a word. So when I say "citizen engagement" I mean in the sense of a

“citizen” of the world. I don’t know if I will be able to bring the word ‘citizen’ back from the slimy toxic mud it has been dragged into south of the Canadian border, but I will try.

What does it mean to be an engaged citizen? Paolo Friere, the great Brazilian educator, said that we have a vocation, a calling, to be fully human. I think this is a good summary of engagement. I am citizen of the world—I have rights and responsibilities to myself and others.

Let’s look at social transformation. Someone said to me, on reading the title of my speech, that what else would be a force for social transformation besides citizen engagement? I wish what this person said was true, but as we see all around us, society is transforming constantly and mostly without involvement of citizens. In fact a good deal is done to disinvolve people. Social transformation is not automatically positive or progressive.

Friere puts in front of us a very important question. He says, “What if we discover that our present way of life is irreconcilable with our vocation to be fully human?” Can we live easily, for example, knowing that 3 billion people in the world live on less than \$2 per day? Or that if we don’t act dramatically and immediately, by 2011 it may well be too late to save our planet from the ravages of human created climate change? For those of us who are American, how many minutes of the day can we ignore the fact that 40 cents out of every tax dollar supports our military and that we are the most militarized nation in the world, with a military capacity that exceeds the next nine most militarized nations put together? Can you who are Canadians live easily with the increasing numbers of statistics coming out of every province showing that poverty is not only increasing quite dramatically, but that is also increasingly racialized? That a United Way

study showed that poverty in communities of color across Canada increased by 360% from 1981 to 2000, while among the general population poverty decreased by 28% in the same time period? Our two countries are transforming into places that are irreconcilable with the values that truly engaged citizens would espouse.

And what is most puzzling is the role of nonprofits in any of this. So pausing there, let's look at the nonprofit sector in the world in Canada.

- Canada has the largest nonprofit workforce in the world, with 12% of Canadians working for nonprofits (compared to 10% in the USA).

- Canada has the second largest nonprofit sector, with the Netherlands being the largest, and Belgium, Ireland and the USA coming in third, fourth and fifth respectively.

- The nonprofit sector in Canada is 7% of the Gross Domestic Product

- There are 161,000 nonprofits in Canada; 56% are registered charities.

- 28% of all nonprofits are in Ontario

- 29% of all nonprofits are in Quebec

Canadians as Givers

About 30% of all the income of all nonprofits is provided by various levels of government, about 50% of the income is what is called “earned income”—fees for service, products for sale, small businesses that support non profit work, etc. The remaining 20% of the money comes from foundations, corporations and individuals.

In the most recent study to come out of Statistics Canada, which can be found on the Imagine Canada website:

- 85% of Canadians made a financial donation in 2006.

- This totaled almost \$9 billion.

--Although higher income households gave more money in absolute amounts than lower income households, donors with household incomes of \$20,000 gave a greater percentage of their income than any others.

--the 18% of Canadians who are landed immigrants gave 20% of the total value of all donations.

--93%, more than 9 out of 10 people living in Newfoundland, Labrador and Prince Edward Island gave away money.

So we have an interesting problem to solve here. If you think of giving money as one element of citizen engagement, Canadians are very engaged, far more than Americans, where about 70% of Americans give money. Canadians are more likely to give money than to vote, or to volunteer (45%) or to attend any house of worship (19%). In fact, if you were to say what is one thing Canadians have in common, giving away money would be in the running. Canadians also volunteer in huge numbers: 45% of adult population, but when you consider how many people could not volunteer because they are too old or disabled or working several jobs to make ends meet, a very high percentage of people who can volunteer actually do.

The sector is huge, the engagement of people is huge. The sector grows every year, giving grows every year, and what else grows every year? Social problems, environmental degradation, racism, gap between rich and poor. And all of this is just as true and more so in the US. There is something very wrong in that picture. A thriving growing nonprofit sector should be correlated to a decrease in problems and an increase in the quality of life. And the fact that it is not is a question that has bothered me for quite some time.

Not all of them are in our control and new problems arise all the time. But I want to explore just a few of these reasons.

The first is in the notion of social transformation. We want a better, a more just society, but we rarely take the time to articulate a clear and detailed vision of what that means. And when someone does suggest a plan, the first response will be, “can we get it funded?” So often fundraising has been portrayed as the reason why something didn’t happen. “We would have ended sex trafficking but we couldn’t raise the money.” That notion has to be abandoned. When the question of funding is the first one raised, we are already not headed in the right direction.

We must be willing to set big goals. We need much bigger goals. In fundraising people love big goals. People are more likely to give to something big than something small. I see over and over organizations set fundraising goals, and then fall short of them. Their board doesn’t rise to the challenge, their development efforts don’t yield enough, the Executive Director is pulled in a million directions and can’t make the time to raise the money. So the next year they set the same goal, or possibly a lower goal. And you know what happens? They have the same experience. But what is the problem? The problem is that meeting the goal, raising the money they said they needed would only give them the organization they have now—overworked, underpaid, poor infrastructure, old computers, too much to do and too few people to do it. Small victories, large losses. What is the incentive to meet a goal like that? We must think much bigger.

Because it not money that stops us from transforming our society—it is time. So I took the time here to think about this. I was given this time by my residency, which turns out, on reflection, to be a very radical gift. Meg Wheatley says, “If we want our world to be different, our first act needs to be reclaiming time to think. No one will give us this time because thinking is dangerous to the status quo. Those benefiting from the current system

have no interest in new ideas. We can't expect those few who are well served by the current reality to give us the time to think. If we want anything to change, we are the ones who have to reclaim time."

Or as the Buddha said, "We have so little time, we must proceed very slowly."

Over the last 30 years, we have been worn down, and our ability to think big has been effected. For example, I started my fundraising career in domestic violence. I worked at a shelter for battered women in San Francisco. At that time, many of us believed that domestic violence would end in our lifetime. Now we see domestic violence programs that start endowments and plan to exist forever. Homeless shelters, which should exist, if they exist at all, as a temporary solution to a temporary problem, now implement planned giving programs. I saw a brochure the other day, "Your bequest will insure that homeless people will always have shelter." But I want my bequest to insure that their will no longer be homeless people.

Our first task is to create a vision of the kind of society in which we wish to live and pursue that vision. The social activist Dorothy Day, who started the Catholic Worker Movement quoted her teacher, Peter Maurin, as saying that our job is to create a society in which it is not that hard to be good. What would make it not that hard to be good? I am not going to answer that now—those of us participating in the rest of this program will have a chance to work with questions like that for the next three days.

The important thing here is that we each have time to reflect and create a vision, and then to share with each other, to develop perhaps a collective vision. The prophet Joel said, "Without vision, the people perish." Those of us who look closely at Bible verses note that Joel deliberately makes this plural. "the people perish"—not a person. Progressive social

change requires people. And how do we each share our vision? This is the engagement part. We need space and time. Individual people can take time, but we also need to create time in our organizations-collective time. Can we have a staff meeting every couple of months that doesn't have a dozen things on the agenda? Can reflection be one of the items at our board meetings or Annual General Meetings?

At one time, and perhaps in some places still, this would have been the job of religious institutions. Sometimes, this happens in a family, but that is too scattershot to count on.

The place where it should happen, and when it does, is most successful, is in the university. Holding open space and time for people to think together, to read and reflect, to research and to come back and talk some more.

The space must be peopled with engaged citizens. And this kind of space can be easily privatized. David Bollier, who writes a great deal about the "commons" says in his book, "Silent Theft: Private Plunder of our Common Wealth:", "Any sort of creative endeavor—which is to say progress—requires an open "white space" in which experimentation and new construction can take place. There must be the freedom to try new things. There must be an unregimented work space in which to imagine, tinker and execute new ideas." When all the space must be funded in order to exist, with imposed quantitative indices and pressure for outcomes, creativity is bureaucratized into narrow paths.

So the first reason non profits don't live up to their promise is lack of vision. And the second reason is lack of reflective physical and mental space. The Summer Program here at the Institute has been that space. And those of us who have been coming over all these years have been blessed to

find it. Looking at time and money, I reaffirmed that time is so NOT money.

But on reflection ourselves, we at the Institute decided to go one step further in creating the space that is needed. The Open University that we are experimenting with this week, is such a space. There has been a lot of discussion and some controversy about not charging fees for this Open University. And it is important to bring this controversy into this talk, and to this week because it is an example of another reason why nonprofits don't live up to our promise, and that is that we are privatized ourselves. We are monetized everywhere. So that even the notion of "free" comes to mean only that an event will be accessible to people who cannot pay. Sometimes it is very important to monetize the value of the people who can't pay so highly that we decide not to charge in order that they can come. But this cannot be the limit of the word free, or it all becomes part of a bottom line—did we make money, did we break even, did we lose money? I am in the money business so these are important questions. But sometimes it is important to refuse bottom line considerations altogether. We claim here at the Open University, a space that is not monetized at all, money is not present here—either present by its presence or present by its absence. This is an open free space, limited only by time. This space is a commons. And those who want a nonprofit sector that will be a force for progressive social transformation must support this kind and this definition of free space.

Finally I come to movement building. One of the most pernicious and damaging myths that accompany societies that place a lot of emphasis on individual achievement is that idea that one person can make a difference. This is simply not true. Individual people can do amazing things and can be extraordinary leaders, but true change is always brought about by a group.

Even individual choices are not what they seem. For example, people who don't vote will often say, "One vote cannot make a difference." But if you don't vote, you are not one person not voting. You are part of the group that doesn't vote. If you shop at a store where you know the products are produced using sweatshop labor, you may think, "My one t-shirt doesn't make a difference." But you have joined the group that shops at that store and you have joined the group that makes the store profitable. One of the most famous stories of the American Civil Rights Movement is that of Rosa Parks. The story, as is often told, is that Rosa Parks, a seamstress in Montgomery, AL on Dec 1, 1955, suddenly got fed up with the racially segregated bus system in Montgomery and sat down in the front of the bus, in the white section. She was arrested and suddenly people mobilized to create bus boycott that led the desegregation of buses and started a whole new phase of the civil rights movement. An amazing person. And she was. But the real story is that Rosa Parks had been a civil rights activist for many years by 1955. She was active in the NAACP, and she had recently been at the Highlander Center in Tennessee for a two week training in community organizing. She was there with Myles Horton, the founder, Martin Luther King and a number of other leaders. They were looking for an opportunity to challenge the segregation of the busses because it was one of most galling aspects of segregation. Blacks had to buy a token at the front of the bus, then get off the bus and re-enter through the back door. Sometimes the bus would leave before everyone had a chance to get back on. When the busses were crowded white people could ask blacks to give up their seats in the black section of the bus. King, Parks and others prepared themselves to be ready to seize an opportunity to boycott the busses. Many people, including dozens of white women, were ready to drive black people to work, fliers

were designed waiting for the moment to be printed. Rosa Parks returned to Montgomery and sat actually in the front of the so-called “colored” section of the bus. She was asked to give up her seat by a white person, which she refused. She was arrested. The next day the boycott started. 52,000 fliers were distributed in 24 hours calling for a boycott, which ultimately lasted 381 days.

The real story is much more exciting than the myth. It is a story of movement building, and when the story is revised to make the action of a heroic individual, spontaneous and unsupported, devoid of context, it serves to obscure the power of collective action and it makes all of us feel bad that we don’t think of such amazing actions or that we are not brave enough to act alone. Plus, nonprofits are all over this story— they made it happen. And we need to be much more conscientious about teaching each other our many stories—famous and not so famous, and not let those stories get re-told in ways that undermine our collective engagement.

When we look at nonprofits through the lens of movement building we ask ourselves what is the government is doing while we are doing our work. As Eric Schragge, who is a professor here at Concordia, notes, “As government devolves more and more responsibility to nonprofits, government itself becomes more and more a vehicle for suppression of dissent.” This comes about through anti-terrorism laws, which I spoke about several years ago in this very place, and by making government funding increasingly difficult to manage because of strings attached and reporting requirements, but in much more subtle ways by nonprofits having too much to do to even pay attention to suppression, by increasing competition for funding, and by nonprofits fear of losing funding or tax status. I will start with the last one on that list. Getting charitable status

here in Canada is not easy, and so nonprofits go to some lengths to protect it. But the problem is that we are fetishizing our status to the point where I have had many Executive Directors here in Canada tell me that they cannot speak out on this or that issue for fear of losing their charitable status. Their charitable status becomes more important than telling the truth. This fear abounds with no evidence for its basis. When you look at Revenue Canada and you ask experts what you are and are not allowed to do and say when you have charitable status, you could drive a truck through the law. IT is very broad. Nonprofits cannot endorse a candidate for office. But we absolutely can speak out in favor of some policies and against others, we can condemn or praise actions of officials in the government, we have far more flexibility than we are using. This enclosure is self-made and has no basis in fact.

And, worst case scenario, supposing Revenue Canada were to crack down on a nonprofit for something they said or did that they felt was related to their mission. Who will win in the war of public opinion on that? But our fear is partly of Revenue Canada, but also because of increasing competition for funds, increasing reporting requirements and bureaucracy and lack of time to discuss what all this means, nonprofits here do not have any confidence that if one of us were to be picked off by a hostile government action, that the rest of us would stand up for them. We are too busy protecting and building our organizations and we are not in the movement building business. What would it take for us to guarantee each other that we will stand up for each other?

As government devolves, the tendency of many nonprofits on both sides of the border is to turn to foundations. Because of the rising gap between rich and poor, there are an increasing number of very large

foundations. Canada has only a handful at this point. In the USA, we have quite a few. I hear groups here all the time wishing there were more of the really large foundations like the Gates Foundation or the Open Society Institute which is funded by George Soros. In both countries, the very large foundations are influential in setting public policy by what they fund. If the Gates Foundation were a country, what it gives away would put it ahead of the gross domestic product of 48 countries. Their board is unelected and unaccountable. Many foundations on both sides of the border do not accept unsolicited applications. Some of them even start their own programs because apparently they can't find any existing program that is satisfactory. So what do nonprofits do? We scramble around trying to figure out who we know who could get us in to this or that foundation. But what we should do is first raise the question, "How does a society allow anyone to accumulate this kind of wealth, and then having accumulated it, give them enormous tax breaks for giving a tiny fraction of it back without using any known democratic process for making those decisions?" Why won't we ask this question? Because we are frightened of losing our funding, which I might point out we are losing anyway.

I have stood here and been very critical of the nonprofit sector. I believe I am allowed to do that. The nonprofit sector has been and will continue to be my life. But now I want to turn the what I will take back with me to the United States: a number of very important ideas and beliefs.

I love the willingness to engage in conversation, consultation, to really pull people together. In order to make sure that as many people get to speak as possible, we have to take the time for meetings and discussion. Some people will have to have the same conversation several times in order that some other people get to have it for the first time. The places for doing

that, the extent to which it is done, is much more developed here than in the USA.

I love the questions people start with. For example, a very large organization that has an endowment of a few million dollars looks at how that money should be invested and starts with the idea that investing in the stock market is immoral. They are not invested in the market at all because they do not believe in that kind of economy. Yet, they know they must use their endowment properly and so they struggle with what to do with that money.

I met with a group of artist run centers, of which I learned there are 22 in Montreal. They have, for the most part, been funded by the government and are now thinking about different options for fundraising. But the first question we discussed is what happens to art, to the definition of art and artists they have developed over the years, when you start seeking funding from other than the government? What happens to the government's sense of its responsibility to art and artists?

These questions set a very high bar, and I want to bring back with me the idea that we can start with big important questions.

The University of the Streets Café program helped me develop some thoughts that had brought me to Canada in the first place. Many people are so alienated from public life that they don't really have any opinions. The fact they have a right to an opinion is meaningless when they have no reason to think that anyone will ever be interested in what they think. People need space to form opinions in the presence of other people, not just alone, and to test their thoughts in a safe environment. They need to be asked questions they haven't thought of, but which make sense once presented. People need to be heard, and they need to practice hearing.

I am in the “answer business” I am a teacher and a consultant. People don’t want answers from me—they want me to ask them questions and help them find their own answers.

I would like to leave behind these thoughts:

I’d like you to imagine that nonprofits can become more self-reliant without letting government off the hook. That self-sufficiency and an entrepreneurial spirit are not inherently bad, but can actually be quite creative.

Having a behemoth neighbor to the south with huge social problems can make you a little too sanguine about your lack of problems here. For example, racism is far larger problem that many white people are willing to acknowledge. Here in Quebec the ongoing struggles around language and identity obscure the fact the thousands of people are arriving here whose first language is neither French nor English. By 2017, almost the entire service labor force in Canada will be newcomers. Even now, poverty is increasingly racialized and it will get much worse, if you don’t act soon.

The reason I have raised these issues with you is because I believe, in spite of all our problems, we of the nonprofit sector are the last best hope for change. We have the money and we have the people to build the world we imagine. We must not be talked out of it or talked down from it. It will take time, more than my lifetime certainly, but possibly not more than some of yours. We want joy from our work. Those of us who have made social justice work our lives entered it because it gave us strength and excitement. The set up now often just makes us exhausted. The biggest piece of work to be done in our communities is creating community. Not returning to some 1950’s and 60’s idea of it, homogeneous and rule bound communities of my childhood in which no one was gay and no one married outside their race or

their religion, full of stereotypes, where questioning authority was forbidden. Not returning to the 1970's of my coming of age, where everything was questioned, but root problems still were not addressed, such as racism and sexism. And certainly not returning to the "me" decade of the 90's. We will not return to any previous way of life—we will take what worked and lessons we learned, but we will give ourselves permission, particularly our young people, to create, for the first time, a community that works, and then the work of citizen engagement will be continuing to build on that work.