

The Practice of Community Work: Experience and Lessons from the Field

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Community work has been defined rightly as art as well as knowledge and skill. It is intentional, and it is accidental as when Robert Preston as “Professor Howard Hill in **The Music Man** is uncovered as a shyster pushing musical instruments on an unsuspecting town with the promise that he can teach all the children to learn to play – and he can’t produce a note himself. Only Maid Marion, the Librarian saves him from near lynching by pointing out to the assembled towns folk that the prospect of a town band brought them all together like never before (of course she was the first to uncover his scheme but then anger was replaced by, sigh, Love).

Or what about the **Wizard of Oz**? At the end of the movie Dorothy’s little dog Toto runs behind the curtain and lo and behold the mighty Wizard is a little man with a bucket of dry ice and a movie projector. But thanks to Dorothy’s journey the Wizard gave the lion courage (a medal), the scarecrow a brain (a diploma), and the tin soldier a heart (heart shaped watch).

Both are excellent examples of the community work placebo effect. Once I experienced its effect myself. Hired to organize a community education program in McBride BC (population then 500?), I did not live there and had 24 hours to find out if there was community interest. I checked into the Sandman Hotel. I had a few lead names in advance and with the help of the local newspaper editor began phoning and visiting people; a school principal, a public health nurse and so on. At the end of the day I had reached about 15 people. I called them and asked if they would meet me at the local coffee shop the next morning. They came. I told them since arriving yesterday I was now an expert on their community. By flip chart I presented what they had told me about McBride when I had met them individually. I said they had made me the expert. If there were omissions or errors this was their chance to correct them – because it was

their picture. It was a powerful moment. One lady said; *you have enabled us to acknowledge and speak about things we wouldn't have ourselves*. They then began planning for their community education program, building on the stories they had told me. As with the Music Man and the Wizard of Oz, people came to believe in themselves.

Sometimes community work happens when there is an external catalyst; sometimes the catalyst is internal to the community. It can be an accidental consequence of a threat or an opportunity and it can be a deliberate, planned undertaking for community improvement, or community preservation. The end result in either case if successful is not only a goal achieved, but the confidence and the organizing skills to tackle other issues and opportunities for the future. Good community work sticks.

All of us can be community workers. I believe most of us in fact are. It is the practice of good citizenship, in community. For Unitarians, it could be called our 8th principle – the freely coming together for a better neighbourhood, a better community, a better country, a better world. Much community work is done unconsciously. It is simply who we are. It is countless daily acts of decency in human beings thinking of and looking out for one another. Yet to “stick” community work also involves learning from mistakes as well as successes. And “learning” is not limited to strategy and tactics. Learning involves the endless quest to understand ourselves better. For when we do, so we will understand better what motivates us, what drives us, and most importantly, understand our impact on others. This is an ethical obligation. We are imperfect creatures striving for a less imperfect world.

This raises *the* question at the heart of community work. I heard the American writer Max Learner express it years ago; *I am committed to the perfection of man yet know it will never be achieved*. Learner described himself as a *tragic humanist*. While a humanist, I am not so dramatic but share the same outlook.

Fundamental to community work is the belief that human progress is possible, human *social* progress. This is the view that from the time human beings became sentient creatures, self-aware, we have the capacity to act in ways that avoid harm to others and

are able to come together for the general good beyond our immediate self-interest. Community work is about selfless acts and about acts of enlightened self-interest. Progress means that over-time our self-awareness lets us build on our learning, accumulating the values, the beliefs, the practices for how we relate to one another, how we govern ourselves and how we use science and technology to improve our physical and material lives.

The belief in the idea of human social progress reached its height in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, illustrated by, among other things, the introduction of child labour laws, the abolition of slavery, the extension of the franchise and increasingly sophisticated systems of democratic governance and the rule of law.

Two World Wars and the Great Depression shattered confidence in the inevitability of progress. Following the Second World War, the world that emerged at the mid-twentieth century was one that was grimly determined to get things back on track. *Never again* was the theme even as the world divided into Western and Eastern Cold War camps. The United Nations and its international systems were established. The grand experiment to overcome blind nationalism, the European Union was launched. There was the International Declaration of Human Rights. In both Europe and Japan massive investments by the victors went into the economies of the defeated nations rather than extract revenge through reparations. The United Nations launched a “Decade of Development” to assist the world’s “underdeveloped” countries as they emerged from colonial rule.

In this climate of growing prosperity in western countries attention turned to social issues, and social policies at home. The welfare state grew exponentially to create a more level playing field for social and economic opportunity. The entrance of the huge post-war baby-boom generation into young adulthood, rejecting the status quo of their Great Depression and their war-weary parents, fueled the civil rights movement in the United States and the legislation that emerged in that country. *Change was possible – change for the better*. In Canada CUSO (Canadian University Service Overseas) was founded with students serving in now “developing” countries around the world, similar to

the Peace Corps in the United States. The Company of Young Canadians was founded to do similar work within Canada. Aboriginal people were finding their voice and the second Feminist Movement was launched.

Into this world of renewed *possibility* for social progress Canada's community work was launched. Do these acronyms ring a bell: CYC (Community of Young Canadians), CCND (Combined Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), SUPA (Student Union for Peace Action), SOS (Summer of Service), OFY (Opportunities for Youth), LIP (Local Initiatives Program), to mention some? Whether launched by youth themselves, by churches or by government all were invested in social change and social improvement and mobilized thousands of youth – plus many adults.

This is the world in which I began my community work practice. "Community work" is a term used interchangeably with "community development." However I find the latter rather limiting, allied as it is with formal public policies and practices to bring about improvement to community life whether physically or socially. "Community work" encompasses this as well as all the things we choose to do as citizens in voluntary association with one another.

The values of community work are simple; social and economic justice, respect for each individual and for all cultures, collaboration, sharing and a belief in the human potential for good. These remain constant but play through the issues of the day whether poverty, race, belief, class, and the environment. The application of course, is the challenge. The community worker is both engaged in the actions of the moment and steps back and reminds the group to constantly revisit their values – *are their actions consistent with these?*

My curiosity is in learning when community work sticks and when it doesn't, and why - *what are the factors at play?*

There is a continuum to community work. It ranges from the straight-forward actions of people in community using the means they control in their everyday lives, to advocacy for changes to public policy and programs, to peaceful civil disobedience. Karl Perrin's

outstanding presentation from this podium in April epitomizes how the environmental movement follows this pattern. My own community work has been in the fields of social and economic justice, in community planning and in the planning and provision of community services. Every assignment has been a learning experience replete with positive outcomes and mistakes. When I have undertaken a new project and if it is going well, I tell people they can thank those I previously worked with, because that's where my mistakes occurred that I now try to avoid.

I have been fortunate to have practiced community work in many different rural and urban settings in British Columbia, and to a more limited degree in Canada and Indonesia. Most activities have been in relation to non-profit organizations, government, education authorities, and community business and social enterprises. Each experience was unique. Each shared commonalities.

- In Grandview-Woodland when I was working with residents in the development of the Britannia Community Services Centre (1970) community work meant driving Mrs. Ambrose's spoiled, over-weight dog "Major" to the vet, with Mrs. A at one door of the car coaxing him into the back seat and me at the other door pushing. *Community work, whether one is the official "worker" or another resident is about building relationships through the everyday business of looking out for and caring for one another. This is what gives community work genuine credibility.*
- Our city's Downtown Eastside is a living archive of community work. Over the years activists have packed City Hall, taken over city streets, camped on railway tracks. Through actions of shaming, naming, confronting, occupying and satirizing residents have a remarkable record of preventing things from happening that were damaging and of achieving their own goals for improvement; the Carnegie Centre, Raycam Community Centre, the Supervised Injection Site, the cancelling of the East-West freeway. The Strathcona Community Gardens and until 15 years ago, much-needed replacement housing. *Community work succeeds when residents assume they have to create their own*

gifts to themselves, no one is going to do it for them, and when people find sufficient common cause that personal animosities and historic divisions in the community can be overcome or at the least, set-aside.

My own involvement in the Downtown Eastside has been primarily through the arts. From colleagues at the Carnegie Community Centre I learned that the arts are a powerful tool for personal and community development. *The arts give voice to people's tragedies and triumphs – they embed the stories of the community through succeeding generations, building pride and providing reminders of powerful histories.*

There are of course many more factors one can list for successful community work. You will have your own and I only wish that time permitted for us to hear them. Here are seven additional criteria from my experience that help good community work “stick”:

1. *Stick to your principles, not to your answers.* Someone else's solution may be better than yours – be open to this. Get our ego out of the way.
2. *In advocacy, do your homework obsessively.* Nothing undermines a good cause more than arguments and positions that lack substantiation.
3. *Create safe environments where opponents can step into one another's shoes.* This can happen through people being willing to learn more about the issue together and about possible solutions.
4. *In victory, do not jump up and down on your opponent.* You may well have to do business with him another day.
5. *Look for the strengths and assets in groups and communities and build on these.*
6. *Recognize that democratic group development and effective social action go hand-in-hand.* People require skills and practices to work well together in groups as well as skills in strategic planning and action.

7. *Know how to analyze systems of governance, decision-making and administration.* Know how systems and the people in them *actually* work is key to knowing how to intervene to influence them.

My life in community work is full of close calls, and of goals and projects that did not succeed. Some were due to my inadequacies, others to events I could not control. I do have one question that continues to perplex me; *why do people act willfully to damage the work of the group and activity of which they are a part and to which they have apparently committed themselves?* These are people who fill the vacuum when a group is struggling, to steer it to their own ends. Challenged, they assume the victim role and if particularly skillful, recruit some sympathetic support from others (who I sometimes feel should know better).

“Willful” is when we act with conscious awareness of our damaging actions and when we rationalize them to ourselves by seeing other people’s beliefs and actions as less worthy than our own. How is such behavior overcome? A belief in social progress requires that it can be, by the group and ideally by the person concerned. We humans are a funny lot.

The unintended consequences of our best intended actions are quite a different matter from willfulness. Though motivated by the best of intentions, sometimes the result of our actions can be more damaging than the problem we are trying to solve, or they can negate the social improvement we desire. *Secondary consequences can have primary impact.* So before acting we also need to ask *who will be affected by this action and what will be the likely result – positive or negative?*

In community work we experience time and time again that it is in the acting for good in concert with others that gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

There are many personal challenges to successfully working together for the common good. Here are three:

8. Acknowledging our own limitations and vulnerability

9. Questioning beyond our own cultural and social frameworks that provide the lens by which we view and act in the world in order to understand their impact on others and being open to challenging and changing our own.

10. Being prepared to learn and to change our behavior

I believe community work “sticks” when we address these personal challenges. I also repeat an earlier point; “celebration” – the recognition and acknowledgement of achievements small and large and of the people who are making them happen. This is the glue that binds and energizes community, and which makes goodness and well-being possible. In such an environment willfulness is errant rather than the norm; the community has the capacity to absorb it without losing its inner strength. As my friend and colleague Al Etmanski writes in his latest book “Impact – Six Patterns to Spread Your Social Innovation;” *If we are to be innovative about anything in the future, it must be how we work together.* (P29).

Finally, we must also remind ourselves not to over-simplify or idealize the idea of community.

Communities can also be places of oppression and intrusion. They require constant democratic vigilance and renewal.

The practice of community work is indeed art and knowledge and skill. In this it is like skippering a sail boat; you know where you want to get to but you have to tack with the wind and the tides to get there – and when you do land, you have to be prepared for the destination being different than what was first envisaged.