DOORWAYS TO HOME INDIGENOUS/NEWCOMER NEIGHBOURHOOD DIALOGUES

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ABSTRACT

Finding Home™: How to Belong in a Changing World is an initiative that engages communities through dialogue and collaboration about the meaning, making and sustaining of *home.* The theme of separation from the land and from nature as an erosion of *home* and reconnection as a means of strengthening *home* has surfaced in dialogues with newcomer and Indigenous communities. Although our disconnections may have happened for different reasons, we believe the Finding Home™ model for expanded Indigenous/newcomer dialogues would be valuable to the common goal and ambitious task of reconnecting to nature, each other and to ourselves.

People from across cultures and sectors are yearning for meaning, purpose and a sense of belonging or *home.* Finding Home™: How to Belong in a Changing World[1] is an initiative founded in 2006 in British Columbia that engages communities through dialogue and collaboration, at deeply personal and social levels, about the meaning, making and sustaining of *home.* Whether our sense of *home* is eroded by the loss of language or land, demographic changes through migration, immigration or displacement, community fragmentation through conflict or trauma, or fundamental institutional changes, Finding Home™ provides an opening for diverse cultures, individuals and sectors to examine together the concept of *home* and the value of belonging, connection and community.

Finding Home™ is based in a belief that *home*— a place where we thrive, remain stagnant or suffer—exists within our relationships. By developing quality relationships across differences, we can build resilient and healthy communities that are capable of responding creatively to change and to challenge. It offers support to communities and individuals while they explore the creation of inclusive communities, and increases effectiveness in addressing personal, local and global challenges. It is within this context of relationship and challenge that Finding Home™ dialogues have proven valuable both within and between Indigenous and newcomer communities.

There are three core aspects to the Finding Home™ initiative: 1) the Neighbourhood Dialogue Program; 2) NGO capacity building; 3) partnership development to support ongoing sustainability long after the dialogues are over. This paper will focus on the Finding Home™ Neighbourhood Dialogue Program, which has proven effective with respect to addressing everyday challenges like housing, elder financial abuse, and loneliness throughout the Lower Mainland in British Columbia. Our dialogue program uses an asset-based community development model that works to build neighbourhood capacity, strengthen civic engagement, and generate innovative resident-led projects.

This paper will provide a brief description of ideas and values underpinning this program, give an overview of some highlights and opportunities emerging from specific Finding Home™ dialogues, and end with some questions for consideration in taking the Finding Home™ dialogues further. Since much of the power of Finding Home™ comes from the voices and stories of people talking about their lives, accounts from actual dialogues will be woven into this paper with the permission of the speakers.

IDEAS UNDERPINNING FINDING HOME™

A growing body of research contextualizes our current state of affairs within the cyclical nature of the patterns of humanity. For example, Arnold Toynbee (1955) demonstrates that prior to the rise of a new era, violence increases and people tend to respond with less creativity and more rigidity to stress, conflict and change. In addition, a pervasive disconnectedness from nature arises. In the past, the genesis of a new way forward has frequently started with re-examining the values and actions by a creative minority who became a catalyst for change.

Ronald Wright (2005:) explains that history shows that "if you do not live within nature's means, then nature shuts you down." For Wright, living within the means of nature is to move from short-term to long-term thinking and from excess to moderation; in his view, this is the solution to our global crisis. Likewise, Thomas Homer-Dixon (2006: F5) suggests that "the place where we have to start fixing our problems is our values […] until we have that conversation properly, we're not going to be able to deal with things like climate change". Jared Diamond (2006) also asserts that we have two choices that will determine whether we succeed or fail as a society, that is, if we complete the transition from crisis-driven planning to long-term planning and if we are willing to reconsider our core values.

In addressing challenges facing today's world, Fuad Nahdi (2003:24) also points to the critical role of values. He suggests that the current increase in global violence is not about a clash of civilizations but rather a mutual collapse of civilizations. He argues that we are "witness to the decay and failure of ingredients that made us 'civilized' in the first place" For Nahdi, we need to rediscover the essence of our humanity and relationship with the rest of creation, including identifying and putting into action core values such as generosity, integrity, honesty, loyalty, and (inter) dependency. In a similar vein, Lakota storyteller Joseph Marshall (2001) explains that the most effective way to regenerate culture, and hence prepare for a new era, is to live our values and share our stories of virtues and those of our ancestors, because they contain the core of cultural renewal for each new generation.

Biologist Mary Clark explains that our brains are hardwired for meaning and connection. In fact, prolonged stress, conflict or trauma influences both brain structure and function. The limbic system in our brain is more easily activated in the face of change or conflict and transmits an adrenal message to either fight, flight, or freeze. She explains that "when stress is prolonged and becomes widespread throughout society, causing more profound changes in the brains of many of its members, then violence combined with apathy permeates daily life and threatens the survival of all" (Clark, 2002: 222). Clark has discovered that storytelling, music and love reverse this change in brain chemistry, making it easier to respond to conflict and change more creatively. From a biological perspective, the best way to heal the human brain, and hence our fight, flight, or freeze tendencies, is through addressing the human need for meaning and connection.

What Toynbee, Wright, Nahdi, Marshall, Diamond and Clark have in common is a conviction that the solution to our global crisis begins with a re-examination of our core values, including a commitment to live within the means of nature. It is in our relationships that we live out or neglect our values. Consequently, our ability to *create a* sense of *home* in the context of our current local and global challenges may very well depend on our capacity to develop quality relationships with others, the environment and even within ourselves.

THE LAND AS A DOORWAY TO HOME

The theme of separation from the land and from nature as an erosion of *home* and reconnection as a means of strengthening *home* surfaced in dialogues with newcomer communities, as well as in dialogues where both Indigenous People and newcomers were present. During my work with a two-year national public conversations project about Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Canada, participants repeatedly explored the theme of each culture's sense of belonging to the land.[2] If a particular culture did not have a sense of belonging to the land, there was a discussion about how that disconnection occurred. Understanding the roots of this displacement from the land was one of the key steps to reconnection. For example, Mark Weintraub, of the Canadian Jewish Congress, explained that after their exile from Israel, Jewish people were forbidden from being farmers in Europe, subsequently leading to the urbanization of many Jewish people. In a similar vein, Janisse Browning explained that descendants of enslaved Africans transported to North America experienced a loss of connection to their land and culture that for many may never be recovered. Likewise, Chief Robert Joseph explained that Indian residential schools and displacement from their traditional territories and cultures led many First Nations People to experience a profound sense of disconnection from the land. Further, in a broad sense, western cultures have undergone a separation from the land over the last centuries. This separation from nature deepened with the Industrial Revolution, colonial expansion and migration to other lands, and urbanization (Berry, 1999; Wolf, 1982). Our conversations about land and our connection to the land were very moving for many participants.

In another dialogue series with Iranian elders in North Vancouver, participants shared stories about the meaning of *home,* how to live well together, and tips for newcomer Iranians on how to create a sense of *home* in Canada. One dialogue participant broke into song about

the Karoun River in southern Iran and told us that all human beings should see this river; because once you see this river you will know the love of the world. Throughout the dialogues, participants expressed the importance of rivers in creating a sense of *home* for them. The post-dialogue success celebration was held at a local North Shore river where the seniors sang, read poetry, danced, gave speeches and shared food. Inspired and empowered by their Iranian River Party, these creative and resourceful seniors were interested in taking the river stories and connections much further. Dialogues, learning opportunities and celebrations with local First Nations and other newcomer groups focused on how the meaning and importance of rivers could provide a *doorway* for newcomer and First Nations elders living in North Vancouver to build relationships that create *home* across their differences.

Doorways can emerge out of dialogues in unexpected ways. During elder dialogues in a First Nations community in Vancouver, elders shared the challenge of constant waves of newcomer groups arriving in Canada with misunderstandings about First Nations history and contemporary reality. During that week, in a seniors' centre only a few kilometers away, newcomer Spanish-speaking seniors participants shared stories of how they found Canadians very polite, however no Spanish-speaking elder had ever been invited into a Canadian home. These two dialogues happened separately, but led to the Indigenous participants inviting the newcomer Spanish-speaking seniors to dinner and to learn about their history. Likewise, the newcomer Spanish-speaking seniors invited the Indigenous elders for tea and salsa dancing.

These examples illustrate some of the core values and principles guiding the Finding Home™ dialogues in fostering meaning, connection and action. The Iranian River Party illustrates how one group's exploration of the meaning of *home* (in this case rivers) provided a doorway to connect this group to one another and to the larger community. The dialogues with Indigenous elders and Spanish-speaking elders illustrate how the Finding Home™ Neighbourhood Dialogue Program can work to address needs through drawing on participants' strengths. When strengths are supported, pain is often transformed into purpose and "victims" into leaders. The public conversations project about Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations gave extensive support to the idea that understanding our disconnection from the land can work to deepen relationships with other cultures, and renew our relationship with nature. It became clear, through all our Finding Home™ dialogues, that though our disconnections may have happened for different reasons, we share the common goal and the ambitious task of reconnecting to nature, to each other and to ourselves.

TAKING IT FURTHER

When individuals and groups explore the meaning of *home* for themselves, they want to bring this sense of *home* to the community. We have seen the powerful effects that engaging in Finding Home™ dialogues can have and believe we have enough concrete experience and evidence to argue that using the Finding Home model for Indigenous/newcomer dialogues can be valuable in many more communities. However, there are several challenges that are getting in the way.

1. **Funding Structures:**
   The current funding structures make it very difficult to support First Nations/newcomer initiatives. Funding is available for Aboriginal initiatives OR immigrant initiatives, but rarely available for joint initiatives.

2. **Supporting ongoing participant-led initiatives:**
   Community projects coming out of Finding Home™ dialogues require skilled support to reach and influence the broader community, and build and strengthen participant relationships across cultural and other differences. While every dialogue series generates many creative and innovative community projects, not all of them get off the ground due to a lack of adequate resources and support. The support usually comes from a program staff person working for the community agency, a First Nation or health region, or other organizations bringing Finding Home™ to their community. Staff can sometimes lack cross-cultural competencies to successfully support resident-led initiatives. For example, some may lack understanding of the importance of First Nations' protocols, gift giving and the role of elders. Staff can sometimes also lack skills in supporting participant leadership. A tendency in many agencies is to either be oriented to service delivery (and hence "lead" projects) or expect participants to be able to lead without giving them adequate support.

3. **Finding Home™ Facilitator:**
   So far I am the only person who facilitates Finding Home™ dialogues. In order to make this process more available, more facilitators need to be trained, mentored and supported. Finding Home™ is in the process of creating a Facilitator training program and training materials. Once these are developed, we will invite partners to fund a pilot facilitators' training project.

4. **Competition and Territoriality:**
   Many community-based programs are struggling for survival, which is leading some to compete over resources rather than collaborate and build on each others' successes.

The lesson I take from these opportunities and challenges is that successful Indigenous – newcomer initiatives require a collective effort. All of us (government, private funders, NGOs, residents and capacity-building dialogue programs like Finding Home™) need to work together, from a base of shared values and a common vision, to create and shape the conditions needed to build quality relationships across our differences that, when well tended, can lead to innovative ways of addressing everyday challenges.

NOTES

[1] To learn more about the Finding Home™ Initiative and Dialogue Program, visit www.findinghome.ca. To read about Finding Home™ outcomes, visit our blog at www.jessiesutherland.ca.

[2] Worldview Strategies hosted public conversations from 2004 to 2006 on the following themes: Residential School Reconciliation (2004); What is Reconciliation? (2005); Worldview Skills; and Weaving Webs of Community (2005, 2006). These conversations were held over the phone. Up to 100 people could listen to a guest speaker and be part of a dialogue with people from across Canada, the U.S., Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. For more information see www.worldviewstrategies.com.

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