

# THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

## **Volunteering and Leadership**

**Presentation by**

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I want to talk to you today about the links which lead from volunteerism to engagement to leadership to community building.

Let me begin with a confession: flattered as I am to be asked to come to speak to you today, I feel compelled to own up to the fact that I know much less about the topic that we are addressing than do most of you. Indeed as I was reflecting on what I might say, it occurred to me that after thirty five years' working in the so-called "voluntary" sector I have never thought of myself as a "volunteer" – despite having been involved as a staff member of several not-for-profits, as a Board member of many others, and as someone who has contributed time and money to a great many others. Only in my first job was I called "volunteer" – when I signed on with CUSO as a recent graduate and went to teach in Africa for what turned into a five-year stint abroad. But those of us working with CUSO didn't think of ourselves as volunteers, though we were called that; and it is difficult to see in what sense we were volunteers, as we received a modest salary and lived in conditions similar to those of our African counterparts (and no one called them volunteers). We joined CUSO for many reasons – a sense of adventure, a desire to experience the world, perhaps even a wish to do some good – but if "volunteering" implies sacrifice of some kind, that was an insignificant part of the motivation, and rarely a consequence.

These reflections on my credentials for speaking to you today led me quite naturally to think about the concept of volunteering, which we take so much for granted as part of what makes Canadian society what it is. We have all heard, and perhaps trotted out, the quotes from De Tocqueville about Americans' unique propensity to form voluntary associations of various kinds which was such a distinguishing characteristic of the society he visited and wrote about in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Canadians, too, historically have banded together in mutual assistance societies, voluntary organizations to address a wide range of community needs and charities to help the needy. Recently we have heard commentators like Robert Putnam talk about this as "social capital", the glue that holds society together, and even more recently we have been told that it is eroding, that fewer people are participating in communal activities, that less time is being spent

“volunteering” – which, as you know, is giving rise to some anxiety and hand-wringing as we contemplate the future of many worthwhile organizations dependent on a steady supply of committed volunteers.

Sometimes the problem is presented to us as “Canadian society relies on volunteers to meet a wide range of needs, and always has done so; but now, we see trends which portend a future in which fewer people are willing, or able, to volunteer”, and this suggests a disastrous situation for many bodies and the people who depend upon them for services or support. Faced with such a scenario, the solution would appear to lie in redoubled efforts to recruit volunteers, to motivate them and to manage them professionally so that they are as “efficient” as possible (i.e. we get our money’s worth from them). But perhaps the reality is very different...

If volunteering is action without expectation of personal gain or recompense, then it encompasses a large part of what we do, though perhaps less than in the days before work, paid work, became such a specialized activity divorced from the normal tasks of daily life.

Once what we did to earn a living became separated from the rest of our lives, carried out in a different place – the factory, the office or the shop – rather than outside on the farm or in the workshop, how were we to define all the other things people did which were not paid for – looking after relatives, helping neighbours, ministering to the sick, coping with emergencies, relieving the poor?

Thus arose, I suggest, the notion of volunteering. It is no surprise that the golden age of volunteering is often considered to be the middle half of the last century, or that the archetypal “volunteer” was the stay-at-home mother – skilled, educated but under-utilized, for whom work, even unpaid work, was a chance to be active, engaged and productive outside of the home. But in a market economy where work is worth what you pay for it, such unpaid labour had to be recognized and dignified; hence the mystique of “volunteering”.

Now that there is no large pool of women seeking an outlet for their abilities, volunteering faces a host of new challenges: how to make it attractive to a generation which by and large expects to be in the paid workforce, which has been taught that “you are as good as the salary you command”, and for whom time may be the most precious resource and self-fulfillment (or the “pursuit of happiness”) the most laudable goal?

Apart from being unpaid, volunteering had a second aspect which has become problematic: it was doing for *others*, that is, it was supposed to be intrinsically altruistic. Looking after aging parents or disabled children didn’t count, and one’s motivation should be unsullied by purely personal considerations. Since most people at some point

do have to look after family members, this aspect could be taken to imply that volunteering had an element of “noblesse oblige” to it: volunteering was the special activity of people who had the leisure to devote their time to looking after the needs of others who were less fortunate. I am not suggesting this wasn’t worthwhile, even praiseworthy, but, again, there are fewer and fewer people in that situation today. Those who have money feel less obligation, and those without have less time.

And so we read statistics of declining rates of participation, and we re-double our efforts to recruit, motivate, train, and manage the volunteers on whose labour and dedication we depend.

What is it about volunteering that gives it such cachet? Is it the fact that it is work which is unremunerated, which makes it seem increasingly anomalous in modern life? Or is it the fact that it is willingly chosen, unlike the obligation to work to put food on the table or the compulsion to pay taxes? Or is it that it embodies a different value system from that of most of our transactional relationships in which we carefully calculate what we are giving and getting? It seems to me that the act of volunteering speaks to a deeply felt need in people to be part of a community, to engage with others in a relationship that is not market-driven. As a volunteer expressed it at a meeting last November of the Muscular Dystrophy Association of Canada: “Je ne fais rien [comme bénévole] par *devoir*, je le fais par *amour*.”

If I seem to be undervaluing the importance of volunteering, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact I believe that Canada is suffering from a shortage of civic engagement, of “social capital”, if you wish. But if volunteering is about choice and belonging, then “mandatory” volunteering in schools, or joining an organization solely to add a line or two to make your c.v. more attractive to potential employers, is not about volunteering.

In preparing some thoughts for today, I asked Vanessa Reid, Executive Director of *Santropol Roulant*, a Montreal-based organization which relies on young people to deliver meals to the elderly or infirm, to describe some “typical” volunteers for me. Her response? There are no “typical” volunteers; there is a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of mainly high school and university students who show up to pitch in – in the kitchen or to carry the hot meals to various neighbourhoods by bike. People like Bradley, aged 24, from South Africa, who stopped by on his way through Montreal, helped out for two weeks, and plans to return on his way back from Vancouver in the Spring; or William, 14, who with his mother comes every second week as a family because “it is a fun way to spend time together”; or Marc André, a university drop-out who does seasonal construction work and likes to spend off-time in a convivial but not “institutional” setting. And so on. Not all are young, but all find value, and a sense of community missing in other parts of their lives. They come, they connect. Why? Because, says Vanessa, they

are not expected to “fit in” to a pre-determined role, instead the organization treats each one of them as a gift, a person with unique qualities and strengths: the organization’s challenge is not to use them more efficiently, but to re-mould itself in such a way that each individual’s contribution can be optimized and celebrated.

I can almost hear you, as managers, saying, “How can we afford to do *that?*” Aren’t volunteers supposed to serve our needs? Well, yes and no. Corporations have discovered that the way to attract and retain valued employees is by imparting a sense of pride and fulfillment in their work, and they have the advantage of the additional incentive of bonuses and options! In the voluntary sector we must go further, we must create opportunities for people to connect, and to express what they care most deeply about. And if this means certain organizational priorities don’t get done? I asked Vanessa for example, what happens to the seniors waiting for meals when snow or cold discourages the couriers, or exams eat up their time? That, said Vanessa, is what we have paid staff for. Note the reversal: people who are paid do the work which is more demanding or routine or unexciting, not the volunteers (as is the case in many organizations – often the ones wondering why they cannot attract a new generation of unpaid workers).

Can we reconcile the contradiction between the undoubted difficulty many organizations have finding and keeping the volunteers they need, and the fact that many people, especially the young, are hungry for ways to be involved? Partly, as I have said, it may be by stripping it of any remaining notions of privilege or noblesse oblige; partly it may be in reminding everyone that volunteering is not an end in itself: it is a way to connect people and to build community. Especially it is by new thinking, with less of a focus on an organization’s need for people-power – our traditional approach which served so well for a century, and more focus on the individual’s desire for meaning, connection, and community. To push this even further, we may have to conclude that many tried and true organizations which have provided valuable services and which rely on volunteers, will not be able to adapt and therefore will not survive – that in fact the voluntary sector’s vitality stems not from the persistence of organizations but from the limitless capacity of people to invent new responses to old problems. In summary: nowadays people don’t want to fit into pre-determined roles, especially if they don’t see their value – the baby-boomers are probably going to be characteristically picky about doing work they define as socially useful, and the young generation coming up wants to create its own fora which are engaging, congenial and fun. Is this a bad thing? Yes, for those of us who are so invested in the structures we have created, but ultimately? No. This is the social sector’s version of the capitalist cycle of renewal and innovation, what Schumpeter famously described as the on-going process of *creative destruction*. Change is not *progress*; change is adaptation.

So volunteering is about participation. Two years ago, John Ralston Saul in an address to the Volunteer Canada annual meeting in Vancouver suggested that we would do better to stop thinking and talking about volunteering as a special activity carried on by that special class of people we call “volunteers”. Rather, he said, being engaged in contributing to society through our unpaid labour should be regarded as a normal part of citizenship, something that everyone is trained and supported to do from the earliest years throughout life.

The focus would be participation, not “volunteering” as such; civic engagement, or citizenship, would be an expectation for everyone, young and old, able or disabled, native-born or recent immigrant. It would be inculcated in school, which would consequently treat students as full-fledged “citizens of the school” rather than passive and uncritical consumers of education who must be mandated to “volunteer”; it would be supported by employers, who would be expected to offer time-off and other assistance so their staff could do unpaid community work (as Ericsson, the Swedish telecommunication firm, has just announced); and it would be promoted and encouraged by governments through tax benefits and other inducements as an essential feature of a healthy society and polity.

Misunderstandings about what volunteering is and isn't lead to confusion about the real role of the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector – which comprises both paid and unpaid workers – is the place where people can connect and build community. The critical issues facing it – the lack of operating funds, for example, which compels not-for-profits to act opportunistically, chasing contracts rather than investing in their own staffs and building long-term capacity – are obscured by an image of volunteerism which in the public mind is equated with amateurishness and improvisation or, for the young, with compulsion. The response to this is not just to be more professional in our use of volunteers but to change the popular understanding of what the voluntary sector is and what it does – to demonstrate why it is as crucial to a healthy society as are an efficient private sector and effective public sector.

At the 2001 annual forum of the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy Bronwyn Drainie spoke about how the Voluntary Sector Initiative launched by the federal government had raised the profile of the voluntary sector but it did not clear up the confusion between voluntary and volunteering which exists not just in the mind of the public but also in the minds of policy-makers and funders. The voluntary sector is more than the volunteering sector, and gauging its health by the ratio of paid to unpaid workers in it is misleading. The voluntary sector is the *values sector*; it is where people choose freely to commit time and effort in pursuit of goals and causes they deem important – for themselves, their communities and their society (and, increasingly, our globe). It is where, collectively, we answer the question “what kind of Canada do we want?” – which the Caledon Institute's Sherri Torjman in a paper she wrote in 2001, phrased as follows: “A nation of active

citizens in vibrant communities – communities which provide support, which promote inclusion, which encourage learning.”

In addition to de-mystifying volunteering, we need to de-mystify leadership. The fact that I am standing up here and you are sitting down there doesn't make me a leader any more than it makes you “followers”. Our bookstores are full of books describing individuals who by their “leadership” have saved companies, inspired millions or changed the fate of whole countries. Most eventually turn out to have been false prophets, and some outright crooks. Of course, there are generally inspiring or extraordinarily able individuals who have had a positive impact but by focusing so intensely on the heroic few we are led to believe that the ability to lead is a special grace vouchsafed to only a minority whereas in fact it is something within the grasp of each one of us.

The most successful leaders I have met in the voluntary sector tend not to see their role as attracting and “using” people more effectively. What distinguishes them is that they don't see their challenge as finding ways to attract and motivate people to help their organization or cause. They simply want to release the potential in individuals, to put them into a situation where their creativity and commitment can be expressed. In a sense they see themselves as brokers – they identify what a person is passionate about and then put that person into a place where they can connect with the issue, do something about it, and see the results, which in turn fuels further commitment.

At bottom, being a trusted leader means *knowing yourself* – knowing your strengths and weaknesses, being honest about yourself and others and therefore getting, and deserving, their trust. It doesn't mean that you're the brightest, fastest, bestest; it does mean you have integrity, you have a vision of where you are going and what you are trying to do, an ability to communicate that and to inspire confidence in others. Debates rage over whether it is innate or can be taught, but there is little doubt that leadership, or the lack thereof, is on people's minds these days. That is hardly surprising: during the stable '50s and '60s it was the manager who was king (yes, king); it was the age of the Organization Man and the MBA. Now, in a world of rapid change, when people are trying to discern patterns for the future the need is less for managers than for leaders, and not just for new leaders, but for a new type of leader.

A few years ago the McConnell Foundation, alarmed at the disarray in the voluntary sector which was the consequence of cutbacks in government funding, the changing roles for the public, private and not-for-profit sectors and other factors, sounded out people in the sector on what they perceived the priority needs to be. The answer overwhelmingly was: stronger leadership. This gave rise to a Master's level program for senior and up-coming managers of national organizations, designed to strengthen leadership skills. More recently we launched a national program to develop leadership at

the community level, inspired by work in Vancouver and Calgary. Again, this was designed to revitalize local leadership – but also to make it more diverse, broad-based and inclusive, more reflective of the reality of Canadian cities today. These programs are running now in fifteen Canadian communities, from Victoria to St. John’s; it is too early to assess their impact but not too early to remark on the energy and enthusiasm they have unleashed!

So volunteering is getting involved. Participating in civic life is how we build shared values. Shared values are the basis for community. And being part of a community is how we thrive as individuals, as families, as a society.

John Gardner in his book *On Leadership* writes: “Families and communities are the ground-level generators and preservers of values and ethical systems. No society can remain vital – or even survive – without a reasonable base of shared values, and such values are not established by edict from lofty levels of society. They are created in families, schools, churches, organizations and other intimate settings in which people deal with one another face to face. The ideals of justice, cultural diversity/inclusiveness, and compassion are nurtured in communities”.

Modern society needs community, shared values, more than ever. But building a sense of community requires a much larger vision of what the voluntary sector, the *values* sector is and does. You, because you work with, inspire and guide volunteers, are the best placed to express and embody this. Just as the voluntary sector must provide leadership to the broader society, you must provide leadership to the sector. By situating the work you do, that your organizations do within this broader context, you move it away from service delivery and “helping others”, away from talk about “clients” and “programs”, and place it squarely in the context of civic engagement and community building, of social justice and shared values.

I want to conclude with some questions for you to reflect on. First, how do we view *change*? Do we welcome the opportunity it presents, or resent the discomfort it can create? Do we think that we have to adapt, or is it up to others to fit into our way of doing things?

Second, what does it mean to us, in practical terms, to shift from being driven by our organization’s or mission’s needs in terms of volunteers, to focus on how we can *help community members to find their path to engagement* (i.e. from “motivating” them to “listening” to them)?

Third, what more do we have to do as leaders in the voluntary sector – the sector based on values, on participation and on community-building – to get decision-makers in the

for-profit and public sectors to view our work not as “nice but not necessary” as Paddy Bowen has expressed it, but as essential to the future of a healthy democratic society?

Finally, can we have “volunteering” as *active citizenship* or democratic participation in a world where people do not feel they are listened to or have power? Where are the synergies with other sectors (the corporate responsibility movement, the pressure for electoral reform or political devolution, and the use of the Internet to facilitate public participation, for example) that create allies in this larger struggle?

The next time people ask me what distinguishes the voluntary sector, why it is more than just unpaid labour, I will tell another story I heard at *Santropol Roulant*. Two weeks ago, on St Valentine’s Day, each of the seniors receiving a hot meal was given at the same time a red rose. That gesture speaks volumes. Impossible to justify in terms of the economic logic that governs so much of our lives, it says that the persons – both the giver and the receiver – are more important than cost or mere efficiency. It says that the organization is not just about filling a need, real and important as that is; it is about relationships, about trust, about love. And that, in the end, is where volunteering, the voluntary sector, and creating a better world meet and join.