

THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

Change, Connect, Imagine and Inspire

Keynote address by

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I am honoured and delighted to be with you tonight, and the following story will explain, in part, why: one hundred and fifteen years ago a boy of 14 left his family and the poor rural community of Bracebridge in Ontario to go to the big city, Toronto, to seek his fortune. In Toronto, ambitious but with only a basic education, he joined the YMCA, which had been established there in 1853, two years after the first one was set up in North America, here in Montreal. What he received there was what the Toronto Y promised: support for the "social, intellectual and spiritual development" of young men such as himself, newly arrived from the countryside. Around 1900, with growing success, he moved to the then metropolis of Canada, Montreal, where again one of his first acts was to join the YMCA. In 1906 we pick up a paper trail, the record of a monthly gift of \$10 (\$200 in today's value) out of his modest salary to the YMCA; by 1909 his name is associated with a \$320,000 (about \$6 million in today's money) campaign to move and expand the Y from its original location on what is now Dominion Square in downtown Montreal to its present Drummond Street site. That money was raised in just 13 days - and it served as a model for the first-ever Endowment Campaign for McGill University in 1911, and later for the wartime War Bonds and Victory Loan campaigns which helped to finance the First World War. The 14-year-old, as you may have guessed, was named John Wilson McConnell. He went on to become one of the most successful men in Canada and to endow the foundation that bears his name. Mr. McConnell never forgot the support, the training, and the values he found at the Y, and over the years he repaid it richly.

On the face of it this is not an unusual story and I am sure many of you here could tell your own version of it. And perhaps that is what is unusual about it: an organization with a history of over 150 years of community service, an organization which embodies a mix of physical, intellectual and spiritual values, an organization which has always had a door open for the marginalized – then, youth arriving from the countryside, now, refugees and immigrants, First Nations people, inner city children and single mothers – an organization at once intensely local in its commitment and focus, and universal in its values and aspirations.

The theme of your meeting is: **Inspire, Imagine, Connect and Change.**

I would like to speak to each of these, but in reverse order. First, **Change**:

It is easy to be glib: we talk about change, at some level we experience it, we have an economy that drives it and is driven by it – but do we actually understand it? Are we engaged with it, or just surfing its superficial aspects, its novelty and faddishness?

Change can be viewed ecologically: if we observe nature we see rapid but superficial change in the succeeding seasons of the year. We also see slower but more profound change as landscapes evolve over decades, trees colonizing fields, streams carving new waterways, and so on. At a yet deeper level, the earth's atmosphere cools and warms over centuries and millennia, and species evolve and die out. And finally, at the deepest geological level change is practically invisible as the earth's crust moves and shifts, mountains erode and are pushed up, and stars explode into being and nothingness.

Mostly, we observe change at the most superficial level: we welcome the ever-shifting panorama of the seasons. We in North America have a culture that embraces and celebrates novelty. But we balance this with a deeper need for stability, a yearning for permanence, and perhaps also a fear that for us, the privileged, real change means giving up things we value, be it security, wealth or advantage.

So we are ambivalent about change. We can look around and see things that cry out for redress – profligate and wasteful energy use for example, or social injustice, and we are moved to do something about them. But – except for a few saints – we would like that something to not create undue pain or disruption in our lives, because finally we lack conviction that we can do anything truly effective to resolve these issues. In the haunting words of Leonard Cohen:

*Everybody knows that the dice are loaded
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed
Everybody knows that the war is over
Everybody knows that the good guys lost
Everybody knows that the fight is fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich
That's how it goes.
Everybody knows.*

Well, I believe that we are at a point in human history when the changes we observe are more profound than winter succeeding fall, or even the transformation of landscapes. We are instead facing a number of "ultimata." Let me give three examples: weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), environmental degradation, and global poverty. "Ultimatum" is a strong word, but I think it is warranted because each of these

challenges now requires urgent human action or our very future is imperiled. What brings each of these to a crisis point is our unwillingness as a society to address them effectively over the past 50 years. But we can no longer shrug these off with an off-hand "Everybody knows, that's just the way it is."

With WMDs, the genie is out of the bottle. For 50 years after World War II the spread of WMDs could be controlled by a small number of state actors, mainly the two so-called superpowers, using the doctrine of mutually assured destruction. The end of the Cold War presented us with the opportunity to destroy the stockpiles and to take decisive steps to prevent proliferation. What has happened instead is that the existing nuclear powers refused to engage in any discussion of meaningful arms reductions for themselves and consequently we are now witnessing a rapid proliferation of WMDs – in Iran, North Korea, South Asia, to name a few – and likely also to various terrorist and criminal organizations. We faced a moment of historic opportunity and we didn't seize it. It is a nightmare of failed leadership, the consequences of which may place our entire future in doubt.

That is one ultimatum; a second is the consequences of environmental degradation. To take but one aspect, it doesn't really matter whether global warming is a result of human activity or a natural, recurring process. The evidence is overwhelming that climate change is occurring; the only debate among serious scientists is how rapidly, and whether we can adapt in time. Even if the climate is changing as part of a natural cycle, we are going to have to try to slow it down by limiting the impact of human activities. But again, instead of awareness of the gathering crisis bringing all the inhabitants of this planet together to face a common threat, we have finger-pointing, prevarication and posturing.

Finally, there is global poverty – though some may argue that here we do not really face an "ultimatum" because unlike WMDs and climate change, poverty is part of the human condition and always has been. That may have been true, but in the 21st century we know that there is nothing "inevitable" about poverty. In fact, just five years ago world leaders at the UN Millennium Summit established a set of eight "Millennium Development Goals" to be attained by 2015, which would have the effect of, among other things, halving extreme poverty (defined as living on less than \$1 a day), halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education. The leaders agreed that these Goals were realistic, achievable, and they solemnly committed themselves to work together to realize them. It would require more aid, certainly, and critically, some painful accommodation to improve terms of trade, access to rich country markets, etc. – but it is doable.

The most recent report on progress toward the Goals, released by the UN before this year's General Assembly meeting, gives a mixed picture. The poverty rate has undoubtedly improved in East Asia and Latin America, but in Africa and Southern Asia

millions more people are hungry and half of the children under age five are chronically malnourished. Eleven million children a year – 30,000 a day – die of preventable or treatable causes.

My point here is not to argue that the glass is half-empty or half-full. The last quarter century has witnessed much progress too: contrary to popular impression the incidence of conflict, for example, has declined by some 40% according to a recent study released by the Human Security Report; the younger generation, especially in Europe, is "thinking green" both in its personal values and political behaviour; long-standing inequalities between men and women, the so-called gender gap, is beginning to close - not just in the West but in poorer countries, as evidenced by rising female attendance at primary school.

The point is that some of us have become anaesthetized, our sense of moral outrage dulled. Whether the glass is half-full or half-empty, there is room for improvement, reason to re-double our efforts – not to sit back and say "well, things appear to be getting better." The UN Report points out that the very poor are getting poorer; after a number of years of decline the number of people living with hunger is increasing again, and half of child deaths are due to malnutrition. And lest we think this is due to the particularities or inefficiencies of the South, we need to remind ourselves that the increase in the number of Americans living in poverty is growing three times as fast as the population as a whole. In Washington D.C., capital of the richest country in the world, where infant mortality rates are twice the national average, half of all children live in poverty, twice the proportion just five years ago.

We can redress these things. OECD member country official aid, at around \$80 billion, is at a record high, but we need to compare it with the \$300 billion these same countries provide in agricultural subsidies to their farmers – incentives to over-produce which, when coupled with barriers to our markets for developing country farmers, deprive Southern countries of at least \$100 billion in benefits (as per the World Bank) – the fruits of their work, not our "aid."

These are statistics; they inform, but they do not engage. So what are the implications of all this for those of us who are here in this room? Quite simply, that we have to make a choice, we have to decide that facing up to the "ultimata" I have just described is no longer optional, no longer something we can put off for the next generation to worry about. That decision, even if it involves some pain and some costs, will require political leadership of course, but it will also require changes in our lives, and in the organizations and institutions with which we engage. We have to stop seeing the statistics and start seeing the people, stop consigning global problems to the care of experts and bureaucrats and pundits and politicians, and start getting involved directly.

My message is that change is personal: we, especially in the rich world, cannot preach austerity and responsibility to others so that we can go on enjoying our SUV lifestyle. But individual actions only go so far; they must be amplified by concerted actions through the organizations, associations, churches and mosques, neighbourhood and voluntary groups of which we are part. Here, that means the YMCA – the worldwide structure and enduring values that bring us together and permit us to connect across borders, languages and political differences.

This brings me to the second theme of this conference: **Connect**.

At a superficial level it would appear that we are better connected these days than ever before. The Internet has virtually erased time and distance, and the cost of communication is approaching zero. Media cover the world: we learn about hundreds drowned in a ferry accident in Bangladesh, a car bomb exploding in Basra or farmers protesting in Chiapas, but usually without any context that would help us actually make sense of these events.

9/11 and 11/9: the two dates that set the context for the generation of people now in their 30s and 40s. One was the day – evening, actually – that the Berlin Wall came down, closing a chapter of history that opened in 1917 with the Bolshevik Revolution; the other was the day when the Twin Towers came down, opening the War on Terrorism. One war, the Cold War, ended and another started, but they differ from one another in almost every respect. Most importantly for the world we live in today, one wall was dismantled and another wall began to be constructed. One wall was physical and succumbed to pickaxes and crowbars, the other is psychological and is being put in place as we speak, fear by fear and prejudice by prejudice.

How ironic: even as travel and technology break down barriers of ignorance and suspicion, terrorism - the threat or reality of it – is erecting new walls of mistrust and fear. The story of civilization is about how human societies have opened up, redefining community beyond the boundaries of family, clan or caste to include "others": first, fellow citizens, then strangers, and finally – slowly, awkwardly – people who appear to be different – ethnically, in terms of creed, sexual preference, or because of disability.

The Y's history has reflected this: first, a mission to inculcate values and welcome the like-minded – young Christian men making their way in an alien and sinful urban industrializing world; then a broader social mission embracing the marginal – recent immigrants, troubled youth, the disadvantaged. And, more recently, a bigger global mission as the Y evolved into an international movement with active chapters all over the world. All through this journey, the Y has been about connecting. Building the movement, sharing resources, working with respect for each other's strengths – all elements of your Global Operating Plan – allow the Y to play an important role connecting individuals.

This connective role is more important now than ever. The world may be linked electronically but this isn't necessarily diminishing our fear of the "other." Governments and business have created international institutions that allow them to communicate and collaborate, but our ability to connect as individuals lags far behind, and the phrase "global civil society" remains more a goal than a reality. Business and governments, rightly or wrongly, are distrusted, their motives are suspect. We must open other channels that allow for direct person-to-person links – exchanges, collaborative projects, ways particularly for young people to get together to share and to act on their concerns. Earlier this year I visited young Cuban and Canadian participants in a youth exchange between Canada and Cuba: I was struck by how quickly these 18- to 20-year-olds had learned another language, English or Spanish (for some francophones both), but more importantly how they had learned to see the world through someone else's eyes. Once learned, it is something you never forget – when people connect, authentically, miracles are possible! The Y, to repeat, is about connecting – in neighbourhoods, across communities, around the world.

In Those Years

In those years, people will say, we lost track

Of the meaning of we, of you

We found ourselves

Reduced to I

And the whole thing became

Silly, ironic, terrible:

We were trying to live a personal life

And, yes, that was the only life

We could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged

Into our personal weather

They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove

Along the shore, through the rags of fog

Where we stood, saying I

Adrienne Rich, 1991

Nobel Peace Laureate Desmond Tutu of South Africa tells a story: *And God says, I have a dream. I have a dream that all of my children will discover they belong in one family – my family, the human family – a family in which there are no outsiders: black, white, red, yellow, short, tall, young, old, rich, poor, gay, lesbian, straight – everyone. All belong. And God says, I have only you to help me realize my dream. Help me.*

The third theme: **Imagine**. Imagine the world as we would want it to be. What would it be like? Peaceful, certainly, environmentally sustainable, providing economic opportunity, social well-being and a rich cultural milieu for all its inhabitants, a world in which people are free to exercise choice, to develop their talents, to live lives of personal fulfillment in diverse, supportive, and inclusive communities.

Is it ridiculous to imagine such a world? Is it not extraordinary that of all the thousands of species on this planet, ours is the only one that has the ability to look into the future, to exercise foresight? We alone are able to imagine something better - and then take action to improve what exists. It is our ability to hope, and to look ahead so as to anticipate and to plan that distinguishes humankind. Why then are we so unwilling or unable to use it?

The Guatemalan indigenous leader, Rigoberto Menchu Tum, who received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1992, described how such a world might be created:

... no peace without justice;
... no justice without fairness;
... no fairness without development;
... no development without democracy;
... no democracy without respect for the identity of all cultures and peoples.

The final theme of this gathering is: **Inspire**.

The engagement we are called upon to make is so profound that it can only come from within. No motivational speaker, no scary scenario of future tragedies, not even reading the lessons of history as detailed in Jared Diamond's book *Collapse* or the many others like it, can compel us to change our beliefs and behaviours. There are inspirational figures, of course, who by the force not so much of what they say but how they live, can set off an empathetic chord deep within each one of us that signals a change of heart rather than just a change of mind.

We each probably have some of these figures in our heads – a Nelson Mandela perhaps, who conjures up a vision of social justice so powerful that it literally changed history; or a Dalai Lama, exemplifying a Buddhist vision of loving compassion and respect for all sentient beings; or perhaps someone closer to home, a parent who modeled values of love and respect that influence our everyday conduct. We need heroes and exemplars to point the way, but each one of us has the potential to lead by example. It was Nelson Mandela, quoting the poet Marianne Williamson, who said:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? ... Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

We need Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and Rigoberto Menchu of Guatemala to remind us what human beings are capable of. But they are also a little intimidating in the lofty example they set. We have closer-to-home models, people like the two young Canadians Craig and Marc Kielburger. Craig at the age of 12 started campaigning on behalf of child labourers in Pakistan and created an organization, Free the Children, which now has 100,000 members around the world, all under 17 years of age. Or Ryan Little, now 14, who started fundraising for wells in Africa when he was in Grade 1, and whose Ryan's Well Foundation has raised over \$1 million for 170 water projects in nine countries. Or, even closer to home, the young single mother who was interviewed on the radio yesterday, who works right here in the Montreal YMCA taking care of a dozen toddlers, and who is struggling on a minimal salary to take care of her own two children while providing love and care to others'. None of these people would claim to be heroes, they are ordinary people who each in his or her own way is reaching out, connecting, assembling the building blocks of a better world, and through their quiet example providing inspiration. Each may be inspiring, but what makes them effective is the organizational context which translates individual initiative into sustainable change. This is also what the YMCA movement does, through its training, community development, and bridging to the wider world. It is for each of us to decide how we can contribute - what we cannot do is stand aside and pretend not to be involved.

This is your challenge, you who have come from so many countries to meet here in Montreal to explore the Y's international role: through the lens of the Y's mission and values to commit yourselves to change our societies for the better, to use your ability to connect people through the unique global movement that is the YMCA, and together to imagine the world we want for our children and our children's children and to inspire and lead by your example in bringing it into existence.

I'll give the last inspirational words to the poet Jon Anderson, whose poem You Must goes as follows:

You Must
*You must have a hope
that will let you stomp and sing
at any cold dawn...*
*You must read the story again
and again to the child
who receives you with a bovine stare.*
*You must get up
every day to punch in
not dreaming on transcendence,
not desiring new heroes or gods,
not looking the other way
but looking for the other way
and ready to talk to everyone on the line.*
*You must not wait for official approval
nor general consensus
to rage. You must
come again to kneel
in shiny, rock-strewn soil
not to pray, but to plant.*
*Yes, even now
as ice caps melt and black top
goes soft in the sun
you must prepare for the harvest.*