

Deepening Community



THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

Epilogue

My Wisdom Moment

In the end, these things matter most:

How well did we love?

How fully did we live?

How deeply did we learn to let go?

--Buddha

In the spring of 2008, I asked the Tamarack board to approve a writing break for me. I had published three books in the past several years and had an idea for a fourth. Writing another book was also a way to distance myself from the day-to-day slog and to immerse myself in dreams and stories.

The board approved my request. I sat down to write. My goal was to write this book that you are reading right now in record time. The essence of the book was based on a talk entitled “Seeking the Possibilities of Community” – one that I had given more than a hundred times to thousands of people. It was the first speech I gave when founding the Tamarack Institute and it had proven to be my best motivational speech. I blush to say it, but my goal was to write and publish this book in six months.

I wrote nearly one hundred pages in the first two months, exploring ideas and recalling stories to make my points. The writing was not easy

– it never is for me – but the words did come. I was engaged with the ideas and deeply excited by them, though the ultimate shape they would take eluded me.

In hindsight, if I had finished this book then, it would have been much like the strategic plan I had developed for Tamarack that had failed to gain traction among staff and board members. The book would have received a “well done” and may have even achieved positive impact. But it would have been flat. I needed to “wake up.” And life, it would turn out, had plans to wake me up.

Near the end of my two months of writing, I started to feel upper back pain during exercise. Thinking it was nothing more than the result of a vigorous yoga practice and the many hours sitting hunched over a computer, I ignored it – until one day it got so bad that Marlene took me to the emergency ward at the local hospital. The doctors said all was fine and sent me home. Just to be safe, they set up some tests for a few weeks later, which showed nothing conclusive.

About a month later, at my board meeting in Toronto, I felt faint, which, coupled with the intense upper back pain, frightened me. The meeting was going well, and I did not want to disturb it. I waited to the end and then sheepishly asked Vali, one of our board members, if she would take me to an emergency ward in Toronto. She dropped everything she was doing and rushed me over to the hospital.

After several quick tests that came back fine, I was admitted into the emergency room for monitoring, as a precaution. In the first hour, several nurses came to visit and then a doctor. My sense was that they were getting ready to send me home. I waited another hour, and no one came to see me. Two hours later, still no one.

I tried to get someone's attention but could not. For the next twelve hours – nothing. I was hooked up to all kinds of machines, so I could not go anywhere. I am not sure why no one came. Some say it was the inefficiency of the staff. Some say it was the shortage of doctors. But to be honest, I do not know. I was simply ignored.

I had my Blackberry with me, which was useful. I emailed Marlene, who wanted to drive right away to be with me, a two-hour drive. I suggested that was not necessary – that this was just routine and I would be released at any time. You can imagine her panic after twelve hours of this.

Vali kept emailing me, and so did most of the other board members. I connected with a few friends as the hours dragged on, just for something to do. I do believe that things happen for a reason. Twelve hours in a hospital bed hooked up to machines monitoring my health provided much time to think and reflect.

My mind started to wander after a while, and at one point I thought, “You do hear of people dying in hospitals while awaiting a procedure.” Silly, I know, but to pass the time I wrote out a funeral plan for Marlene to find. It included some of the songs I wanted sung and even the menu for the meal after the service. (Marlene has promised to serve a full-course Indian meal with real beer from India – my favorite.)

I remember, in a less sober, or perhaps morbid, moment writing down all the people I knew and documenting all the things I knew about them. That was fun, until my mind shifted again to my funeral and I started listing all the people I thought might show up. The mind can play funny games.

After twelve hours, a doctor showed up and said she wanted to send me home. They had found nothing. I was excited. She left ... and never came back.

Again nothing happened. My sense was that she forgot I was there and just left at the end of her shift. Nearly two hours passed before another doctor arrived. By then it was about two in the morning. The doctor was a second-year medical intern who wanted to ask me a bunch of questions. I was so bored by then that just having some human contact made me the best patient ever.

I answered every question – went out of my way to tell my story and give her the answers she wanted so she would stay. She stayed for an entire hour. It was somewhat comical, because several of the interns had not shown up, and she had been assigned their pagers – she had three in total, and during our visit she received calls continuously. She left somewhat embarrassed, needing to attend to an emergency. She promised to return soon to finish with me.

I tried to stay awake, but it was nearly impossible. For the next four hours, I dozed off from time to time, only to be awakened by an alarm monitoring my heartbeat. How was I to know that my heart rate slowed to what was considered abnormal just before I fell asleep? When the alarm sounded, I woke up and my heart rate went back up and the alarm turned off. I cannot figure out to this day why no medical staff ever came to check on me. I began to see the whole thing as a test of how long I could stay awake.

The medical intern had returned at about six in the morning to tell me that I had been diagnosed with a flapper – a loose piece of “skin” inside the main artery to my heart. My blood was generally flowing fine, but every once in a while the flapper blocked the blood flow for a few moments. Within twenty-four hours, a stent had been placed into what one nurse called the “widow-maker artery,” and I was sent home.

Who could dream that everything would change so much in just forty-eight hours? I’m stunned when I remember that I, who believe in the absolute power of community, sat mostly alone for the first twenty-four hours of my forty-eight in the emergency ward, trying to keep myself awake. This person who had been able to control nearly every variable in his life suddenly realized just how vulnerable he was; that he was not really in control, and that all around him was an unpredictable world.

Having a stent placed in an artery is a fairly benign procedure and is done thousands of times every day around the world. The doctors seemed fairly relaxed about it. So a week after the procedure, even though I still felt very tired, my doctor declared me healed and told me that I could go back to work and travel again.

I took a plane to Newfoundland to give two days of lectures. The beautiful seaside resort where I was to give the lectures was two hours from the nearest hospital. No one other than I was concerned about this. The fact that I was speaking to nearly two hundred health professionals brought me some peace of mind.

Still feeling very tired and wanting to pace myself, I had flown in a day early to rest up from the flight. My plan was to explore the city that evening and continue on to the resort the next day. I realized that something was really wrong when I stood at the bottom of a hill

looking straight up, wondering how I was going to climb it to get back to the bed-and-breakfast where I was staying.

It took me over an hour to climb a hill that would normally take me ten minutes. I paced myself the next two days, using yoga and meditation to calm and focus myself, and delivered a keynote and a three-hour plenary workshop.

When I got home, I consulted my doctor, who was mystified by my symptoms. He said if they persisted I should go directly to emergency. The next night I visited a cardiac rehab center founded by Dr. John Schaman. He suspected a blood clot and recommended that I go straight to the hospital. My sense is that no one really believed that if it was a blood clot I would actually still be walking around, and for this reason they were providing a hypothesis and not a diagnosis.

My wife had scheduled a launch for her new book, *The History of Mennonite Women*, at McNally's in Winnipeg. I thought I would wait to go to hospital emergency until after she left for that event on the plane the next morning. The next day I kissed her goodbye, and as she left in the airport taxi, I called my friend Vic and asked if he would accompany me to the hospital.

An hour after arriving at the hospital, I was back on the angioplasty table. The doctor verified that there was a small blood clot on top of the stent that had been put in several weeks earlier. He suggested that it formed within an hour of my first operation. I had been walking around with this clot near my heart ever since. I spent the next nine days in hospital being injected with every kind of blood thinner known to humankind.

When I came home from the hospital, I looked out the window and saw the trees turning into their beautiful fall colors and felt more grateful than I could have imagined. I felt I had just received the greatest gift of all, as though my life had been saved and I was seeing everything for the first time. There was an amazing sense of freshness, like I had just woken up from a wonderful sleep.

I suppose I could say that I came through a near-death experience, though it does sound a little too dramatic. I could have died several times; the risk of dying was far greater than at any other time in my life, and I was aware of this.

Even though changes were slow to come, I had been awakened.

My awakening had been to the people around me – and how grateful I was to have so many caring people in my life. People I had not seen in some time had come to visit, and good friends and family came daily. All through those nine long days, I was emailing with people across the country. My sister and several others emailed me every night at nine, wishing me a good sleep. I would never again take these relationships for granted.

I was so grateful for this connection that I emailed Jim Balsille, one of the founders of Blackberry. He had volunteered in Tamarack Institute's Opportunities 2000 campaign, and we had stayed in touch since. I thanked him for the wonderful connection a Blackberry can be to the people you love while in hospital and told him my story. He emailed back the same day, acknowledging my message and wishing me good health.

This experience also woke me up to the importance of the writing I was doing about seeking community. I realized, as never before, that this was not just the kind of work I like to do, but that I had something to say about a critical difference that needed to be made in the world. I knew, though, that I was not yet ready and that the words that I had started writing were not adequate for journey. I needed to explore the ideas further and to experience what I was writing. I needed to go on my own journey and open myself to the wisdom that was available to me.

The first realization was that I needed to get more involved in my local community and to embrace what was going on around me. I needed to explore with my neighbors, friends, and family what community really means to me; to explore the communities in my life, both current and past.

Second, I wanted to engage with others about the meaning of community and to invite them on the journey. I created a website at www.seekingcommunity.ca¹ and invited others to share their stories and experiences. This proved to be a wonderful gift and affirmed that many others were also seeking community. They would provide tremendous insight into the complexity of both our world and journeys toward community.

Last, I needed to be more deliberate about my own journey and to be open to new experiences all around me. I wanted to visit other cultures and embrace what they could share with me about the experience of being together, learning together, and living in new ways. I wanted not only to explore the meaning of community but also to better understand the possibilities of community and connection.

¹Now www.deepeningcommunity.org

I needed to suspend, for a while, what I knew about community and be open to the wisdom that was all around me, to understand what it means to be awake in this world and to embrace community in the context of what is really happening. I wanted to embrace the chaos that is on the horizon and to understand how community might help us find our way through it.

Reflecting on my life and near death in the quiet of a hospital bed, I found a new energy and purpose, and I wanted more. A month after I was let out of hospital, I saw a notice at the yoga studio I was attending. The teachers who had inspired the studio's founders were holding a yoga retreat in India.

I immediately signed up to attend. My goal was to awaken with ten days of yoga and then travel to Chennai, Pondicherry, and Madurai to learn more about community. A Gandhian movement in India known as Sarvodaya, a word translated as "the welfare of all" or "the awakening of all," had piqued my curiosity.

India

My first ten days in India were spent in a yoga retreat in Goa, a former Portuguese colony known for its beaches, beautiful architecture, and religious traditions. The retreat was held at a private residence that might as well have been named Heaven. It was located in four acres of tropical forest at the edge of the ocean, with staff that cared for our every need as if we were family.

Each morning we rose at about six to greet one another and share tea. By six-thirty we were on our yoga mats for an hour of meditation and reflection. From seven-thirty until noon, we were put into every possible twisted position known to humankind. My body type (fairly large) is not ideally suited to yoga, so there was often much laughter and a wee bit of frustration as the teachers helped me find a posture that I would then hold, most often in excruciating pain, for what like felt an hour. The afternoons were spent visiting and enjoying the pool and beaches.

Our teachers, Hart and Ramadan, were gracious with their time and interested in our lives. They listened to my story of seeking community, of my blood clot and my awakening, without judgment or surprise. Each evening they held conversations that allowed us to share our questions and observations and to explore the feelings that arose within us as we mediated and practiced yoga. Even though I have been a churchgoer all of my life, I had never experienced such a depth of inquiry.

I also enjoyed being alone, the quiet of a small room to sleep in, and long walks on the beach. Everyone at the retreat was a seeker: Carina, Jacque, Marina, Catherine, and the others. We ate together, sat quietly, read, and engaged. Life does not get much better than sharing such moments of community with seekers in real time.

Ten days of awakening to the joy and fear in my life, and in the life I had grown up in, provided a deep calm. I learned of the struggle to keep the mind quiet, focused, and awake. I learned that I am both utterly alone in this world and in the common struggles of a community. And I learned about the power of flow and letting go.

When I returned home, I immersed myself in my work for the next several months. My writing was proceeding slowly, but my feelings were still too raw, and the depth of my experience too near, to get it all down.

I decided to sign up for a writers' retreat at a center in Michigan called Gilchrist, which combines reflective sessions with silence for three days. I asked the retreat center if I could stay four more days for a complete week of silence and reflection. This was another new experience for me and a source of great humor for my friends – “Paul quiet for seven days?”

Even as I prepared to go, I knew these days were connected to the journey to awaken and hear, as something was waiting for me in that place that I did not expect.

The Wisdom Moment

At Gilchrist, after a time of reflection, including a spiritual cleansing conducted by Martha Travers, we were sent to our cabins for twenty-four hours of complete silence. Mine was nearly a mile away in the woods. It was tiny, with a bed and an outhouse. I had a small backpack over my shoulder and a heavy bag in my hand. Even though the hike was substantial, I took with me my yoga mat, my bolster for meditation, and even some blocks to prop up my knees and make sitting more comfortable.

The day there was lovely and the silence welcome. I listened to the birds and enjoyed the warmth of the sun. However, as the hours passed, I became restless. I dug deep down into my backpack and pulled out my Blackberry to see if it still worked this far from anywhere. It did!

Feeling terribly weak and guilty, I went to my emails to see if there was anything that would fill my mind, trying to convince myself that one little peek wouldn't really matter. An email had come in from my son, Michael. With great excitement, he shared that in his soccer finals, the game had gone into overtime and then to shootouts. He was the keeper (goalie), and he stopped the opposing team's shot to win the game. I was so thrilled for him! One of the great sport moments of his life – brilliant!

This moment of joy quickly turned into overwhelming depression. How could I be so selfish as to go on retreat when my son was playing such an important game? Even though I tried to miss as few of his games as possible, I traveled so much it was inevitable I would miss some. But this one I had full control of. And even though he and I talked about it before I went and he gave me permission, I felt like a terrible dad.

I sent a long email to Marlene apologizing and then one to my son. The despair shook me through the evening, fueling my self-doubt and bringing many failures to the surface. The darkness of the night descended on me. I was alone, absolutely alone, in a tiny cabin far from anyone. The silence welcomed my fear, embracing every worry. The minutes and then hours felt like an eternity. How could one night be so long?

At Gilchrist, three contemplative retreat centers sit side by side. The forests connect them as if they are one. For decades people have been coming here to listen and to hear. They say the earth is thin here, and therefore the wisdom that lies within can more easily be realized. I wrote a poem that recognizes this, dedicating it to John Howie for his service to the land and its soul.

GilChrist

Awake, awakening like
the cold releasing from
the morning dew

The quiet is creeping in
filling my restlessness with
the knowing rooted deep within

Today your embrace is strong
I open to the song
held for centuries in your skin.

I awoke very early the next morning; the sun had just barely risen. I made a coffee and went outside. I sat on the porch for several hours before I laid out my yoga mat to do some stretching, then sat in meditation for about an hour.

I felt the pain not only of the previous evening but of my whole life and the life that came before me. The worry and deep fear of my parents and the community that raised me enveloped me. At the same time, I felt an overall lightness and a profound joy for the life I had been given and the one I was living – for the wonderful family, extended community, and meaningful work that consumed my life.

Instead of fighting each other, these feelings fed each other. They were one feeling, one experience. The sun rose over the trees and its warmth enveloped the space where I was sitting. I stretched out my legs, which

had been folded for meditation. I moved my bolster and I lay back on my yoga mat, the earth and the sun warming me at the same time. I was one in myself and with the earth and the sun.

This moment felt like it went on for hours, as I lay there with the biggest grin on my face, engulfed in the joy. I was more open than at any point in my life. Awake, alive, ready.

At one point words started to fill me, but they had no form. I picked up a small booklet I was carrying with me and started writing. I did not stop for a long time. I recall a feeling of “What is happening to me?” As I wrote, it seemed that the words were coming from the earth. I had tapped into something, and it was sharing its wisdom with me. My hand could not keep up with words that once were blocked now came in a torrent.

I am not sure how to interpret this moment or reflect on its nature. I prefer to see it as a wisdom moment rather than a prophecy or divine message. It came deep from within, from a place I recognize as “spiritual knowing” through a personal connection to the divine. Was it God choosing to reveal herself to me? Was it the wisdom forming in my mind like light through a prism, through silence and meditation, capturing the experiences of my life?

The nature of the revelation does not matter to me. I was awake; I was listening; that was all I needed to know for now. I had no choice but to follow the wisdom.

I close the story of my journey of seeking community so far with the words that were revealed to me. I have not changed or edited them in any way. I leave them with you as they were given to me, as both a

summary of what came before and as the beginning of another journey
– and the anticipation of another story waiting to unfold.

You are chosen. This place has been waiting for you for centuries. This is your place. Continue on your path.

By the power and truth of this practice may all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.

May all be free of sorrow and the causes of sorrow.

May all never be separated from the sacred source of happiness which is sorrowless.

And to live in equanimity without too much attachment or aversion,

Recognizing the equality of all living things.

My work is to bring healing to the world. The healing of the soul, the spirit between people and of the earth.

We are at a critical time in the history of all history. We are at the brink of destruction. This is now common wisdom. Now is the time to connect to each other and to agree on the future. There is no other way or path. Our only choice is agree to be together, to work together to save the earth from destruction.

This journey need not be a terrible one. It is really a journey of hope. In this hope we will connect deeply, spiritually, joyfully. We

*will see each other like we have never seen each other before.
And we will learn to love again.*

*A new sense of community is emerging. Our hope is to embrace
this.*

*We have recognized that in order to save the world, we must live
differently. We recognize the harm that fossil fuels have done to
this earth and have begun to look for alternatives. We must
accelerate this search.*

*We know several things. The first is that science is helpful. We
are exploring alternative forms of harnessing what God has given
to sustain us. This is a good journey.*

*Second, we have recognized that we must live more lightly on this
earth. This has prompted millions to seek local alternatives. We
want to grow things we can eat. We want to harness the sun, the
water, the rain, where we live. This is the right path.*

*Third, we must now connect to each other and trust each other.
All the good in the wisdom we have found is not enough unless
we learn to live together differently, better; unless we learn to
trust one another, learn to agree how we will live together in a
new way, to understand the connection between “my” community
and “our” community. To fully realize the “us” – the connection
between all living things.*

*This third way is critical to our survival. It is the way to living in
equanimity; it is the way to less attachment and less aversion.*

This third way recognizes the equality of all living things.

This third way is the new community that we require to sustain life on this planet.

When we live in community with each other, we learn to reach out to the “other.” This happens most often in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, in our stores, in our associations, in our places of worship. We open our hearts to the other and ask, “How are you?”

“How are you?” is the basis of our new life together. It is the concern for the other. When we live the “How are you?” way, we become as concerned about each person we meet as we are about ourselves. “How are you?” becomes a way of life, a way of being, a profound recognition of the other in the now. “How are you?” becomes a way of opening us to selfless giving.

From “How are you?” we move to “How can I help?” How can I help you to live your dream for a better world, a full life for you, your children, and your community?

The very essence of “How can I help?” is altruism, the selfless giving of myself to the other. The selfless pursuit of the other’s well being. This is a critical aspect of the third way, the third path. It is the very act of reaching out to the other that causes a healing between us. It is this reaching out that enables equanimity in reality, in real time.

“How are you?” and “How can I help?” can also be a collective experience. Though, unless it is first a personal experience, it cannot become a collective one.

It is, though, in the collective experience of altruism – what we will call collective altruism – that the real hope for our world exists.

Individual acts of altruism are critical, as they are the only path to collective altruism. But it is collective action for the benefit of all that is our only hope in these dire times.

Massive action is required now! A mass mobilization of altruism, in which we deeply ask the questions of each other and our world: “How are you?” “How can I help?” These two simple questions, spoken from each heart, are the answer to our healing. The healing for our souls, the healing for our earth. This healing must, though, be on a scale unprecedented in history. Mass collective action in support of the needs of others and this earth will, if realized, have a profound healing for the earth. When we reach out, we will find our answers.

It is not too late. Please do not become cynical or be afraid. We can save each other by simply asking these two questions: “How are you?” “How can I help?” We will ask this first of each other, and then one community to the other, then one region to the other, then one province or state to the other, and then one country to the other. We will ask this so often, and so genuinely profoundly, that the divisions we have set up to define ourselves, to separate ourselves from the other, will disappear. Families

will become communities, communities will become nations, and nations will unite.

Here, though, is the catch. If we cannot live selflessly between each other, we will never live selflessly between nations. Collective altruism starts with individual altruism. The questions “How are you?” and “How can I help?” are questions we must learn to ask in all our interactions, not only with humans but with all living things.

And here is the secret. When we learn individual altruism toward all living things, it sparks a collective energy that can change everything. This collective energy is collective altruism. As the energy of single acts of altruism converges, it exponentially creates good. It is this hope we have.

Now, to consider the exponential result of individual altruism, we must learn to act together, to collectively ask the questions “How are you?” and “How can I help?” Now, this is not as easy as you think. Collective action requires us to learn to work together; to learn to suspend that which we think is the right action of the individual. That which is good for me is not necessarily good for all.

In order to learn to work together, we must learn to release individual will. Not to fully release it for all time; this can only lead to mass manipulation. But rather to learn to suspend it. To suspend individual will for a while, long enough for collective action to emerge. Once collective action emerges, the common agreement to the questions “How are you?” and “How can I help?” will be answered. A clear test here is to determine if this

answer resonates with those closest to you. Is the wisdom of the answer good for all? In the best interest of all?

The joy of giving is at the heart of the third way – the joy that opens us to each other and to the possibility of a new world. “How can I help?” How can I give to the other, to live in this new way?

To ask the question “How are you?” first to yourself is critical. To sit with this question for some time is important. To truly understand yourself is the secret of knowing the other. It opens us, grounds us to the other, and helps us be at peace when we hear the other.

“How are you?” is also a question you can ask another person, a community, an organization, a country, and even nature. To sit collectively to ask this question is critical to collective action.

Similarly, the question of “How can I help?” is a question we can ask ourselves. How can I help myself? How can I help you? How can I help build a better place, world? We can also ask this question together: “How can I help?” In this case, “I” is the “we.” When the “we” becomes a collective, the unity of the group acting is expressed.

Now what? How do we proceed?

Have you ever questioned what you know to be true? Where did this questioning lead you? Is wisdom something we achieve, or is it really moments we capture when we are awake or awakened? What causes us to go on a journey of discovery? Do these

journeys ever end? How do we live the good life? What does it mean to get ready for the good life?

Now what?