

Caring is Life

Keynote Address by Vickie Cammack & Al Etmanski

Deepening Community Edmonton, June 2016

[Access accompanying slide deck](#) - (pgs. 8-29)

We live in Surrey BC.

Until recently we avoided telling people that. We preferred to say Vancouver or near Vancouver. If pushed, we would say we live in White Rock or Ocean Park or **South** Surrey. But never Surrey.

The reason can best be summed up by a member of one of the Community

Associations who was quoted recently as saying, "I'm kind of embarrassed to be living in Surrey right now. We're back to being the running joke."

When I used to go to the comedy clubs in Vancouver one of easiest ways for a fumbling comedian to get a laugh was to simply say, "Surrey."

Embedded in that word was scorn, ridicule, disgust, embarrassment. The message was clear - This is a place to avoid. Who would want to live there?

Well nearly half a million people do. Surrey, is the second largest city in BC and 12th largest in Canada. It welcomes 800 new residents a month.

Of course, Surrey has its challenges. In December 2013 Julie Paskell, a 53-year-old hockey mom, was murdered outside an arena in the Surrey suburb of Newton (about 10 km from where we live) while waiting to pick up her son who was refereeing a hockey game. This tragedy further tarnished Surrey's reputation as the crime capital of Canada.

Surrey's institutions and formal authorities have not been idle in responding. There is lots of good work underway. We have a crime prevention society that conducts safety watches, the business improvement association is cleaning up graffiti and the current Mayor was elected on a campaign to hire more RCMP, which she has done.

Still violent crime is up 36% this year. Gun shootings and gang violence are on the increase. The media as you can imagine is having a field day. Fear, especially in Newton is growing.

Creating an Ecology of Caring



"Caring for one another creates alchemy in our communities while unleashing a force deep within us. It nourishes our social immune system and reveals our humanity."

Vickie Cammack, lyze.com

But there is another side to Surrey that the media often miss. **The force of caring is on the rise.**

We want to tell you about two local residents, and friends of ours, Cora and Don Li leger, who are rising to the occasion.

Don and Cora are artists – very successful artists. Nothing in their background suggests they would become neighbourhood organizers and social innovators. In fact, if you suggest they are they just laugh; “Oh that’s what you do Al and Vickie. We’re just ordinary people helping out.”



Here are some of the ways they are helping out.

First they organized the People’s Food Security Bureau an informal band of artists brought together to integrate art and life through food.

Here’s their MISSION Statement:

“With art at the center, The People’s Food Security Bureau advocates artisanal agriculture, home cooking, and living in the oneness of all things.”



Then Cora and Don hatched something big. They took over an abandoned field and turned it into a community garden. They called this garden: The PLOT.

You know what PLOT stands for don’t you? Potatoes, lettuce, onions and (Al’s favourite), turnips.

The PLOT is a field right behind the arena where Julie Pascal was killed. And in this field trust, abundance, beauty and life are bursting forth. Here is an aerial picture of the PLOT.

Don and Cora lassoed a retired RCMP (who collects drones) to take the picture. You can see how beautifully laid out it is. Don and Cora describe it as “Edible land art for the community.” By the way, you can also see the arena where Julie Paskell was killed.

The PLOT is a place for *Food-sharing, collectively tended, where all are welcome*. The first thing you encounter when you arrive is the medicine wheel.

This ancient symbol embodies the circle of life. This recognizes that the PLOT it is a sacred place providing food for the spirit.

Of course there have been obstacles.

The PLOT is a single season garden with no permanent structures. When the City wouldn't allow them to build a tool shed, one of the neighbours offered his if they would clean it out. A couple of folks who were handy with their hands did! Another neighbour offered a water source.

When City Maintenance workers came by to cut the grass: Don, who is also a champion bee keeper, said; “please don't cut the dandelions, they're an important food source for bees.” City workers obliged. In order to keep her boss happy, the grass cutter mowed a symbolic strip around the edge.

In this picture are some people often described as homeless. In the community garden they are foreman host, gardener, handyman, and beekeeper. Don even designed a parking lot for their carts. They've even created a colourful spot to break bread and have tea together.



No fences; no security, nothing damaged. Only things they have to worry about are wire worms and carrot flies.

Don and Cora are clear. Everyone is welcome. Take what you need. And the PLOT has a beloved motto that is known by all: ***Sharing Is Caring***



Here is a picture of a young boy who is always at the garden.

When I saw him last week he was busy planting, weeding, transplanting, occasionally asking Don a gardening question:

“You’re quite the gardener,” I said.

“Yes,” he replied. “Yes, I am.”

“Been gardening a long time,” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, “a long time, nearly two years!”

He then showed me the proper way to thin the carrots. I predict we have a master gardener in the making!

Don and Cora are not the only ones plotting stuff. You know that list of associations John McKnight shared with us? There’s a similar list of community associations in Newton:

- Friends of the Grove
- Newton Piano project
- Cedar Bark Poets
- Engaged People for a Walkable Neighbourhood – led by the City of Surrey’s Director of Public Safety
- Surrey Interfaith pilgrimage
- Newton Pop-Up Gallery + Creative Hub has opened which includes exhibitions, artist residencies and interactive art projects presented by seven artist collectives. As well, there is as a space where the community can interact directly with artists and each other through creative exploration.

There’s also:

- Jon’s Newtrition Kitchen
- Transition towns
- Global Centre for Peace

Lately, I’ve been hanging out with a not-your-usual Academic who spends a lot of his spare time walking the streets where young people hang out.

He has introduced me to young woman from Africa who has a splendid and workable vision for employing the entrepreneurial skills of fellow Africans. So far no one is listening. She is doing street youth work on her own time.

This is just Tip of the Iceberg as you can imagine.

There are daily acts of caring for friends, family members, neighbours and co-workers who are elderly, sick, disabled, or just down on their luck.

In our neighbourhood...

- Connie has invited her brother who is recovering from addiction and mental health challenges to live with her;
- Jane is an errand runner, confidante and power of attorney for her best friend who is in her final days
- Beth is caring for her husband with cancer
- There's bus driver, Joe, who drives little kids back and forth from gymnastics four days a week.
- There is Julie, a young mother of three, who has become the premier environmental activist in our community campaigning to stop the trains carrying dirty US coal from running through our community.
- And there's also Harriett, who organizes music festivals coffee houses with live music

You are probably thinking there is nothing unusual about any of this. The same caring is going on in our community. And of course you are right.

Let's take a moment and think about the caring that occurs in your communities and workplaces. Quickly jot down three examples of caring actions – in your home, your workplace, your community.

The Natural Care Sector

Caring is flourishing in Canada.

Every day, everywhere, by just about everyone caring takes place.

Yet nearly 100% of the money goes to formal solutions.

As the public face of care have been professionalized and reduced to service interactions, our conceptions and experiences of care has been increasingly commoditized and corporatized. Consider the 'customer care' specialists' you encounter after traversing the phone tree to get assistance for virtually any product you need help with. In our health care systems blockbuster drugs and technologies have taken center stage and 'care' is provided in tightly controlled units.

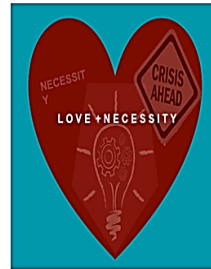
Our social care systems are dominated by caseloads and service plans. In these experiences we come to understand that care powered by love has little value inside systems where care is powered by money.

By contrast, the caring actions, which we define **as natural care or love in action**, underpin most of the caring, conserving, creating, innovating, entrepreneuring, protecting, advocating for all life on earth.

Natural care occurs outside the formal sector. By formal we mean governments businesses and corporations and non- governmental organizations.

By outside the formal we mean individuals variously known as citizens, friends, neighbours, family and Al's favourite, 'passionate ordinaries.' We also mean networks (*think circle of friends*) and of course associations which John described to us yesterday (*think service clubs, Ladies Auxiliaries, book clubs.*) We will not insult these folks, their networks and associations by describing them as the informal sector as they are often referred to in health care.

3 Lessons for Building Our Social Immune System



Lesson 1: **Vulnerability** is the seed that **grows care** in our communities

Lesson 2: If **necessity** is the mother of innovation, then **love** is its other parent. Care is a precursor for innovation.

Lesson 3: **Isolation** is a worldwide epidemic. We need to be intentional about **tending to the garden of our relationships.**

We describe their ubiquitous presence and life giving contributions as the **natural sector** – natural in the sense that it is in our nature to take care of each other, our water, trees and indeed all life.

The danger is that natural care's omnipresence has led to it being taken for granted. Much like the air we breathe. It is so natural and ubiquitous and I daresay ordinary that we risk it being undervalued and ignored.

We would go so far as to assert that the split is 80/20 in favour of the natural sector. That's right 80% of caring in Canada is done by the natural sector.

And their contributions like those of Don and Cora's are nothing short of extraordinary.

Further that the success of the formal system depends on the health and resiliency of the natural sector. For example, it is impossible to imagine how the healthcare system would survive without the care given by families, friends and neighbours. How would people be able to leave the hospital, get to their physio, age in place, and even keep their spirits up without it?

There are **three dynamics** that make natural caring a powerful ally in addressing any of the challenges we face as neighbourhoods, communities, individuals, networks and families.

- 1. It's relational** – We don't care in a vacuum. The quality of care is about the quality of our interactions with our loved ones, and indeed our adversaries. It about our comfort navigating the power and powerlessness that lies beneath care relationships, the healing and acceptance, the protecting and letting go, that all underpin natural caring.

2. **It's reciprocal** – There is an **exchange** in every care interaction but it is not the tit for tat that we have come to define as reciprocity. Sometimes it may be the satisfaction, long after our care has been given, of knowing we did the right thing. Or paying it forward.

3. **It's Responsive** - Natural care is responsive to and guided by our needs, capacities and the unique trajectory, which may shift from day to day. This flexible dynamic, so individual, finely tuned and honed is the antithesis of how programs, institutions and most organizations function.

It seems to us that action fueled by natural care, freely given, guided love in action, is like the sun and the rain of our humanity. For many of us caring may be so routine and ordinary that we forget to pause and see the life force contained within our caring actions. And in its “ordinariness” we risk overlooking the profound value of natural care to support individual and societal happiness, well-being and health.

When I was a child most people loved nature but they did not value and respect it. The oceans and the sky of my youth were vast and infinite, seemingly capable of absorbing everything we put into them. We burned our garbage without thought for air quality. If a tin or bottle fell in the sea, no big deal, it would float away, out of sight. We were far removed from indigenous wisdom and did not understand how interconnected all parts of the environment are. Nature was still seen as something to be dominated not something to be treasured and honored.

In many ways today, we have become as ‘careless’ about natural care as we were about the natural environment in decades past.

The transformation we seek depends on a recognition of natural care. A resurrection of this powerful ordinariness calls us to refocus our eyes to see it.

Caring as a Verb

We want to conclude by talking about the revolutionary potential of *caring as a verb*.


Vickie and I have been speaking about the power of individual caring, healthy communities and neighbourliness for a long time. John has too. So have many of you.

And we are worried.

While there have been many, many, short term successes – not a lot has changed in the long term.

4 Design Principles to Create an Ecology of Caring

Design Principles



Source: Vickie Cammack

Value Vulnerability
See the gifts of dependency

Create Networks
Connect intentionally

Seek innovation
Unusual suspects, transitional touch points

Illuminate the meaning of care
Education, stories, interdependency

We think our challenge, as John described yesterday is as much cultural as it is programmatic. Neighbourliness and caring don't have the status they deserve in our society. Or get the attention they deserve.

We shouldn't fool ourselves

There are powerful forces that overshadow natural caring, and neighbourliness: technology hard and soft – not just I-phones but also social technologies that distract us; BUYING STUFF, consumerism; the iron rule of the economy (first we fix the economy then we deal with the social and the environmental); and economy's advance to greed and destruction.

I'd also like to suggest there is another powerful force that overshadows our work: PATRIARCHY; Hierarchy and perhaps even misogyny.

Caring, sadly is most commonly seen as women's work, Undervalued and underpaid and underappreciated. It shouldn't be but it is. And that is a travesty.

I want to speak to the men in the room for a moment.

Our gender has a lot of catching up to do. The way I see it we have two options:

- **Become Feminists**

Feminist as in honouring all life. As in being able to do more than one thing at the same time such as taking care of our children, families, food, fish, air and birds while also taking care of our economy. As in knowing that vulnerability and strength are not opposites. As in understanding that giving birth to justice, equality and peace is painful. As in women and men making the world a better place together.

- **Reclaim Husbandry**

Or, if you want a term with masculine gender connotations, how about recovering and reclaim the old English word 'husbandry,' and the images and attitudes that go with it. Husbandry as in carefulness and concern.

Natural resources are carefully 'husbanded' when they are protected and preserved for the use of future generations. In other words, caring for the good of all

Let's Call It Caring Husbandry

It's time for men need to speak out, champion, participate and identify with natural care. It times for all hands on deck.

Natural care is at a crossroads. There is a lot at stake today. We are being called to be bolder than we've ever been. Now is not the time for incrementalism.

Fortunately, we are being supported by the cultural winds, currents and patterns which are shifting.

Many of us have been heading into a head wind for decades preserving what's left and preventing further cutbacks.

Four Actions to Support a Revolution in Caring

That's all changed. We can take our fingers out of the dike **and take action for the boldest rendition of the world we want.** If you want to support the revolutionary potential of caring as a verb here are four tips:

1) **Pay attention to what feeds your spirit: to the source of your moral oxygen.**

Here I want to distinguish between motivation and inspiration.

Motivation doesn't feed your spirit. It makes you dependent on others, on someone from the outside feeding your spirit rather than tapping into your own spirit. In that sense motivation is the opposite of Asset Based Community Development which is internally focused.

Motivation is dangerous. It can suck the life out of you. **Inspiration comes from within. It relies on your spirit and inner resources.**

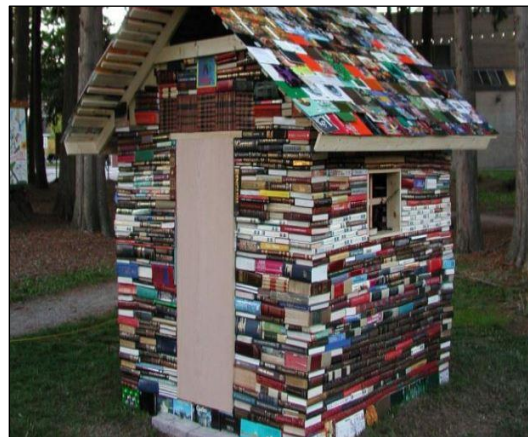
This work requires us to step outside our comfort zone. You can't motivate someone to do that. You need a healthy spirit and soul to do that. That means tending to your source of inspiration. Only you know what that is.

2) **Shine a light on what's already happening.**

The house pictured here (to the right) was built in the grove beside the garden plot. It was built by Don Li-Leger. The 'bricks' are mainly encyclopedias, textbooks and reference books. All were discarded, unwanted and destined for the dump until *Don and Cora Li-Leger rescued them.*

The metaphor is obvious:

Every community, despite its challenges and imperfections has proven ingenuity that would fill a set of encyclopedias.



Like all communities, the powers that be have two choices:

1. To bring in experts from 'away' to guide their policy and resource allocation; or,
2. To be guided by the creativity and ingenuity within their communities.

Sadly, despite the abundance of personal, neighborly and associational caring going on in Surrey, the City of Surrey invited primarily outsiders to present at their inaugural Summit on SI last year. We are hoping that this was a temporary misstep.

3) Tend to your Garden – Nurture what is already happening

If you work inside systems:

Do everything you can to remove obstacles for caring actions by citizens. Create a neighbourhood/passionate ordinaries unit. Provide connective tissue – help people to see they are part of something bigger than themselves; that they are not alone; that what they are doing has purpose. Vickie and I describe this as thinking and acting like a movement. Collective Impact is another social technology that can help.

4) Bring Beauty into Our Work

Anne Michaels, in her book *Fugitive Pieces* WROTE, “We have to find a way to make beauty necessary and a necessity out of beauty.”

The inescapable truth of wanting to make our neighbourhoods better is that we must touch hearts before we can open minds.

Painters, poets, singers, musicians, dancers, sculptors, storytellers, gardeners and other artists have been connecting the head and the heart have been doing exactly that since the beginning of time.

Don't ignore the artists in our midst. They are a precious resources and indispensable companions on any social change journey.

It would be foolhardy to proceed on our social change journey without their company and artistry.

Life thrives where care abounds.

Maybe this could be our revolution – to love what is ordinary as much as what is scarce. To hold natural care sacred. Our humanity comes alive in our commitment to one another and the planet. It is the sun, the life force of our humanity. Through our loving care, we are reminded that we are part of the web of life on earth. When we touch one strand the whole web vibrates. We need one another. We have a shared responsibility for others and the world. Being good and decent is worth it.

LIFE COMES FROM LIFE: From air, food and water that is pure, whole and natural...from a sense of purpose. From pleasure, music, life comes from artists; and, FINALLY from caring for each other.

We can say that with authority because we are proud residents of Surrey. No thanks to the comedians.

The Authors



Vickie Cammack – is a Social Entrepreneur and Care Innovator. Vickie's unique response to the isolation and loneliness that underpin some of our most intractable health and social problems – a network model of care, has been adopted internationally. She is a social entrepreneur who has established many organizations dedicated to strengthening community and addressing social isolation including [Tyze Personal Networks](#). This pioneering Canadian technology venture has been called the next frontier of caregiving for its work in creating online networks of care for people facing life challenges.

Vickie is also the founding director of the [Family Support Institute of British Columbia](#) and she co-founded [Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network \(PLAN\)](#). She created PLAN's Personal Network program, a practical and strategic approach to address the isolation and loneliness experienced by people with disabilities. As the founding CEO of [PLAN Institute for Caring Citizenship](#) she mentored the spread of grass roots PLAN groups in 30 locations globally. Vickie writes, consults and lectures on social networks, care, community and social innovation. She is an advisor to the [Employer Panel for Caregivers](#). She is co-author of ***Safe and Secure - Six Steps to Creating a Personal Future Plan for People with Disabilities*** and [Accelerating a Network Model of Care – Taking a Social Innovation to Scale](#).

Vickie is a member of the Order of Canada and the recipient of the Meritorious Service Medal of Canada, the British Columbia Community Achievement Award and the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for her work in the field. The Women's Executive Network named Vickie as one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women.



Al Etmanski – is an author, community organizer and social entrepreneur. He observes that true lasting change happens when necessity gets together with love and caring. His new book, [***Impact: Six Patterns to Spread Your Social Innovation***](#) is a bestseller. He is co-founder of [Social Innovation Generation](#) (SIG) and [BC Partners for Social Impact](#). Previously he co-founded [Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network](#) (PLAN), which has spread to more than 40 locations around the world. He proposed and led the successful campaign to establish the world's first savings plan for people with disabilities- the [Registered Disability Savings Plan](#). He was recently awarded the Order of Canada and the Order of BC. He blogs at aletmanski.com