
Creating Hope in Hard Times

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A. Two Scenarios for the 21st Century

1. Polarization: Haves and have nots, social deficit;
Less social spending, more spending on public security;
No-go areas in cities vs gated communities with own security.
2. Resilience: Self-reliance, investment in human capital;
New forms of collective action;
People taking responsibility for themselves and their colleagues, neighbours,
friends.

The seeds of both scenarios are with us now: homeless and marginalized people vs clear expression of Canadian social values (CPRN Project). We Canadians identify ourselves by three basic human values -- self-reliance; moral responsibility to help each other; investment in future generations.

B. The Forces of Polarization

These forces are hurricane strength. They are powerful, systemic, sweeping across all industrialized countries. Hard times because of discontinuities - layering of events - knock down blows.

1. The Workplace: Shamrock Economy. Contingent workforce, pieces of work, pay for performance.
2. Family Structure: Marriage breakdown (60 % of women with kids end up in poverty);
Single parent families – 20% of families with children;
Latch-key kids, abused kids;
Arrive at school not ready to learn.

3. Fiscal Cuts: Major cuts in welfare, education, health;
Tearing down the support systems;
Fiscal corrections are essential, but should not lose sight of values;
Example of Harmony House: 16 flats for battered women, turnover 2 to 3 times a year, as they sort out custody, gain confidence, find a place to live;
These systems cannot function without professional support.

Citizens are vulnerable to these polarizing forces. Layoffs, illness, marriage breakdown constitute a knockdown blow. Some people bounce back relatively soon. Others need time and support. Not because they are lazy or stupid. Their main problem is that they were laid off, and we were not.

C. What Creates Resilience?

How do people bounce back in the face of these powerful and systemic forces?

1. Personal resilience:

- Self-confidence;
- Work experience;
- Creativity/professional skills.

2. Networks:

- Can be kin/non-kin, e.g. parents who help out, neighbours or colleagues;
- Personal advice and support;
- A cup of coffee, a contact, help with a resumé.

3. Community services:

- Child care, parent resource centres, after-school programs;
- Home work clubs, elder care, home care, meals on wheels;
- A mix of professional and voluntary support systems.

4. Formal support programs:

- Job finding clubs;
- Training programs/ student loans;
- School-to-work programs like internships;
- Welfare programs (ECC results on transitions out of poverty in 1980s).

The resilient society relies upon a social contract among citizens. Every citizen is expected to do his or her best to be self-reliant. But when the going gets rough, there is a willingness to help.

D. How to Create Hope in a Polarizing World

On a broad societal basis, we invest in social capital: that is, in learning systems, in sharing systems, from early childhood on.

1. Indirect contribution – by paying our taxes and making sure governments know what our priorities are.
2. Direct contribution to creating hope. We can begin to act out the social contract in new ways. We can forge new kinds of partnerships to make things happen in our community.

Employers – in the public and the private sector – have to be front and centre in these new partnerships;

Vested interest in building or maintaining a healthy community with resilient citizens;
Not just money – although money sometimes helps – mostly in-kind support.

Here is a list of actions that would create hope for people who have been knocked down by the harsh winds of polarization:

Employers can create opportunities for young people to help with the school-to work transition through partnerships with schools:

Placements for coop students;
Internships for graduates;
Adopt a school, and promote visits to your workplace. Share equipment.
Sponsor outings.

Employers in partnerships with other stakeholders in the community can make miracles happen: they are community supports that help people who have been knocked down by layoffs or marriage breakdown or an illness:

After-school programs for adolescents;
Homework clubs for kids who are struggling in school (and at risk of dropping out);
Day care cooperatives,
Elder care services;
Mentoring for unemployed people;
Freenet support groups – for isolated caregivers.

What is needed in most cases is some equipment, some meeting rooms, large amounts of organizing skill, willing men and women who care enough to help, and some modest amounts of money. We have all of those resources in this community. Dozens of community institutions (Shepherds of Good Hope, Harmony House, our public schools) that know their mission and execute it well. But they need our help.

We cannot avoid the hurricane forces of polarization. But we can build community institutions that are hurricane proof. The knockdowns will continue to happen. We need to build resilience.

As our society transforms, so must our social institutions. For the 21st century, we must take personal and collective responsibility for the health community. We must build the community bridges that help people to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and start all over again.

That is how we can create hope in hard times.

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