

# Neighbourliness and Common Sense

by Al Etmanski

*Many years ago, as a young father, I was confronted by the refusal of the Vancouver School Board to accept my daughter into a regular classroom in her local school. The fact is my daughter has a disability. The fact is I believed (and still believe) that her differences were minor and did not prevent her from being a good student – both learning and teaching. And so began a great struggle. My life was occupied with the realization of my dream – to see my daughter treated like her two sisters. My mind was preoccupied with this goal. My adrenalin was flowing. I was a warrior alert to any weakness of my opponent. I was uncompromising as an advocate. And eventually I won! Elizabeth was accepted into her neighbourhood school.*

The battle was over and I could rest.

*Or so I thought.*

*I soon realized that regardless of the challenge faced by parents in securing inclusive education for their children with disabilities, greater challenges remained – the limitations and inadequacies of the regular school system. My struggle for my daughter could not be separated from this larger struggle. These larger challenges were my challenges as surely as the stubbornness of the Vancouver School Board was when my daughter was young.*

*Nowadays I would never consider the struggle for full inclusion in the school system as a war. I now understand there are no losers when children like my daughter attend regular school. Everyone learns, everyone gains, with inclusive education.*

*However, I have learned an important lesson. The struggle for acceptance, for inclusion, for accessibility and for participation by people with disabilities in our society doesn't stop there. People with disabilities have a duty as citizens, like the rest of us, to contribute to the common good – to respond to the challenges we face as a society.*

Neighbourly love, like common sense, is a paradox. While most would agree they both exist, few of us claim to experience much of either in our daily lives. For some these concepts are steeped in nostalgia, reflective of an earlier era, by-products of a simpler time. It is common to hear many commentators bemoan both the lack of common sense and the lack of neighbourliness today. In fact, most people might agree with the proposition: neighbourly love makes common sense, but it does not make common sense to expect much neighbourliness in our modern world.

Common sense and neighbourliness are elusive concepts – hard to describe except perhaps in extreme circumstances when both are clearly manifest and obvious. We observe neighbourliness during times of emergency: the ice storm in Quebec, power blackouts in Ontario, or forest fires in British Columbia. We are amazed and impressed by the voluntary caring and helping that seems to arise naturally during these events. We praise the quick thinking, knowledge and good judgment of rescuers – clearly key elements of common sense. We then lament the lack of such praiseworthy and inspirational acts during more ‘normal’ times. Unfortunately, we do ourselves a disservice when we succumb to either romanticism or skepticism about neighbourliness and common sense.

This skeptical certainty, this ‘commonsense’ view about the lack of, or the decline of neighbourliness, is not reflected in our work at PLAN (Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network). In a very simple way and on a daily basis we experience, enjoy and are thrilled by examples of neighbourliness sparked not by disaster or emergency but by the loving act of ending the loneliness and isolation of people who have been labeled, marginalized and ignored. Furthermore, we have discovered this neighbourliness is a most powerful inspiration and catalyst for confronting the two great challenges of modern society, *belonging* and *meaning*.

The journey from ending the loneliness of people with disabilities to resisting the skepticism of our modern age and uncovering and celebrating our neighbourliness is a direct one, though perhaps not immediately obvious, and certainly not as complicated as one might expect. In fact, it has led leaders within the disability sector to join with leaders from other sectors of our society to create the Philia initiative – a Dialogue on Caring Citizenship. Perhaps what is unique about the Philia Dialogue on Caring Citizenship is that the leadership and experience are grounded in the disability sector’s insight, wisdom and expertise.

People with disabilities are venturing outside the comfortable boundaries of their sector and finding common cause with others in society who seek to enhance and inspire civic involvement, neighbourly love, or what the ancient Greeks referred to as *philia*. To understand the origins of the Philia Dialogue on Caring Citizens, it is important to understand another way of thinking about disability – one focused on friendship, not services.

### **Insights From the Disability Community: The Power of Friendship**

It is perhaps viewed as ‘common sense’ to expect the destiny of people with disabilities to be inextricably linked with professional services. This is how most of us understand disability – a dependent state requiring the availability of professional programs and services. It (the marriage of services and disability) appears a truism as obvious as folk wisdom, traditional remedies and ‘old wives’ tales’. Pretty soon the actual physical or mental impairment is pushed to the background in favour of the service or program solution. A person with a disability becomes defined not by who he or she is or can be, but ‘exclusively’ by the service he or she may require.

Even though most of us now know that handling frogs doesn't cause warts and that you can't catch a cold from standing in a draught, we have not yet severed the connection between disabilities and services, a connection that in fact casts such an immense shadow over persons with disabilities that it is impossible to imagine their very existence without them.

Eventually when we see someone with a disability, we see only their needs, their requirements for service – a person without the ability to help themselves, a person in need of external assistance – an incapable person. Most of us, including, sadly, many persons with disabilities and their families, cannot imagine disability without programs and services. To question this equation does not make common sense. But questioned it must be.

At PLAN we believe the unquestioned connection between disability and services has circumscribed, damaged, commodified and limited the lives of far too many persons with disability – and kept the precious gifts of these persons from being available to the rest of our communities. We have discovered that challenging the conventional wisdom and rejecting the seemingly unassailable link between disability and service has led to new insights and experiences. Instead of asking “What service or program does this individual need?” we have learned to ask, “What is a good life?” The answer to that question leads one away from traditional social service and rehabilitation responses to a discussion about the meaning and purpose of life. Thus, with a simple shift of perspective we are able to relegate services to a supplementary position in the lives of persons with disabilities – as they are and should be for all of us.

Consistently, five elements arise as the basis of a good life: caring and loving relationships; living in a place of one's own; contributing; making one's own decisions; and having basic financial security. Upon reflection, it is clear that most of us would come up with the same answers. During the course of asking thousands of people, “What is a good life?” we discovered that in fact the biggest handicaps are isolation and loneliness. And we have come to understand that professional services and programs perpetuate this loneliness. So we created a new organization whose principal mission is to end loneliness. We see our role as bridging the gap between isolation and community.

This insight is not new. Jean Vanier has committed the past 40 years of his life to creating places of belonging: L'Arche communities, where men and women who have been labeled and isolated can experience genuine community and the reassurance of living with people who love them and who will not desert them.

PLAN, too, seeks to end the poverty of loneliness. However, unlike L'Arche, which invites people into its community and communal home, PLAN creates social networks of support for labeled or marginalized individuals in the community in which they already live. These Personal Networks are made up of people who care about the person who bears the label and who grow in

relationship with each other. We have discovered that slowly, over time, individuals begin to bask in the glow of friendship, relaxing, becoming more confident, reciprocating. Belonging is a marvelous elixir. This sense of belonging flows from trust – the gradual acceptance of others as they are, with all their gifts and their limitations.

However, we noticed another phenomenon emerging from the deep relationships nurtured in the context of these Personal Networks: the individuals at the centre of these relationships began making contributions. It started first with the reciprocity experienced by each of the members of these Personal Networks. These people began speaking of the profound sense of meaning that had come into their lives as a result of their relationship with the person with a disability and other members of the Personal Network. These contributions flowed in other ways as well. Individuals with disabilities discovered hidden passions and interests, which led to great art, to volunteering or to working. Others contributed in subtler but equally significant ways through the gift of their imagination, their presence and their difference. In fact, we often describe contributions in two equally important ways: contributions of *being* and contributions of *doing*.

This should not be surprising even to the scientifically inclined. Abraham Maslow, in his famous hierarchy of need, suggested that belonging comes before meaning or self-actualization. In fact, we have discovered that caring relationships are often the pre-requisite for contribution. Relationships serve to acknowledge the belief that everyone has a gift, to acknowledge or validate previously unrecognized gifts, and to create a comfortable place from which people can explore how best to make their contributions. In effect, relationships magnify gifts. And it is only through relationship that our gifts are given.

Since relationships are the source of all contribution, individuals who have previously been ignored, marginalized or seen as incapable because of their disability begin to be appreciated for their gifts and contributions.

After fifteen years, it is possible to begin drawing some conclusions about *philia* as a result of our experiences at PLAN:

1. Isolation is the biggest handicap.
2. It is only through relationships that most of us make contributions. People who do not belong cannot make contributions.
3. There are two kinds of contributions – contributions of **being** and contributions of **doing**. If there are barriers to our contribution or no expectation to contribute, our lives will lack meaning.
4. It is through our contributions that we become recognized and accepted as full citizens.

5. The real challenges of people with disability are not those of pursuing and acquiring services, but those of belonging and meaning. Services have a functional purpose to assist or supplement these challenges – but not to supplant them.
6. The act of reducing or ending the isolation of individuals with disabilities not only benefits those individuals, but just as important, increases social cohesion and meaning for all involved.

### **Common Concern**

We believe the challenges of belonging and meaning are not unique to people with disabilities but are, in fact, the central challenges of our modern society. Robert Bly, the award-winning American poet, suggests that the greatest disease of contemporary times is our inability to find meaning. Daniel Yankelovitch, the pollster who has been tracking North American values for decades, reveals that the search to be part of something larger than oneself is our number one desire. Many possible answers have been suggested for the decline in our social connectedness and this feeling of meaninglessness:

- busy-ness and time pressure
- the waning influence of religion, great literature and cultures of the past as sources of meaning
- mass media, particularly advertising, that create superficial yet unquenchable appetites for meaning
- material affluence
- residential mobility and suburbanization
- a decline in volunteerism
- the cultural revolt against authority, including a disillusionment with politics
- the growth of the welfare state, which crowds out private initiative, subverts civil society and makes caring a professionalized commodity
- television, the electronic revolution, and other technological changes. The average North American watches four hours of TV a day; children, particularly pre-adolescents, watch even more. The evidence of a link between the arrival of TV and the erosion of social connectedness is not merely circumstantial.

Within the disability sector a similar analysis has been taking place. More and more of us are concluding that loneliness and wasted lives of persons with disabilities are due to:

- the limitations of professional services and programs in addressing loneliness
- the unquestioned marriage between disabilities and services

- the perpetuation of 'client' status
- the fact that despite the prevailing rhetoric of integration and community living, most people with disabilities do not enjoy the status of, and are not typically viewed as, full citizens
- the view that reason and intelligence are the sole criteria for determining competence, choice, and the capacity to make decisions
- a focus on 'rights' descriptors to articulate the nature of the relationship between persons with disabilities and their fellow citizens
- a frustration at being defined exclusively by one's disability
- the lack of appreciation for the gifts and capacities of those who have been labelled and marginalized.

In short, it appears that the search for belonging and meaning is a common challenge for *all* citizens.

### **Common Cause: A Convergence of Interests**

*Philia* is a Greek concept for neighbourly love, or the bonds of friendship that bind us together in community. In its fullest sense, *philia* embodies the concepts of resilience, hospitality, caring and reciprocity, and might be defined more fully as *the reserve of human warmth, affect, enthusiasm and generosity that nourishes and stimulates the fellowship that is at the heart of civic life*. Thus *philia* is both the cause and the effect of caring citizens, inspiring as well as describing them.

### **Resilience at the Core of Philia**

The fundamental assumption underlying all aspects of the Philia Dialogue on Citizenship is that of *resilience*. Resilience is the inner capacity to bounce back to a healthy state after shocks or continued periods of stress. Individuals, families and communities share this capacity with most living systems to return to balance with little or no outside help.

An understanding of resilience suggests that individuals, families and communities have a basic integrity and a built-in capacity to heal, transform, modify, adapt and survive. It opens up a way of thinking that reminds us we are not passive recipients constantly in need of outside support and intervention, reacting to external forces in a mechanical way.

Observing resilience at work in nature and in communities invites us to re-examine some of our assumptions about how persons, families and communities function, grow, mature and heal. The lens of resilience has far-reaching implications for a 'grassroots' as opposed to a 'top down' approach to citizenship and social action. Through this lens, for example, individuals with disabilities shed their status as 'objects of charity', units of service need, passive recipients of help, and become who they are and want to be: actors in their own lives and the life of their community. In other words, their capacity is assumed and they become contributing citizens.

Without a true understanding of resilience, persons with disability are destined to remain submissive to the programs of social engineers, which in turn reinforces that old 'commonsense' belief that life in service is the only life possible.

### **Guiding Principles**

For caring citizens to flourish, there are core 'enabling' principles or virtues that underpin how we act and behave toward each other. The Philia Dialogue is committed to exploring these principles, nourishing their presence and inspiring their engagement. These enabling principles include: civility, hospitality, reciprocity, trust, respect, and justice.

### **Goals of the Philia Dialogue**

Philia joins with others who want to nurture and inspire caring citizens and inclusive communities. We want to deconstruct traditional assumptions about citizenship and construct an approach that includes the diversity of our communities and the diversity of our contributions. We want to rehabilitate core principles or virtues and explore their relevance and importance to the challenges of our modern world.

We have deliberately chosen the process and method of dialogue to signify our commitment to incorporating ideas and values, respecting all perspectives, collaborating, seeking common ground, and discovering new possibilities and opportunities

### **Philia Activities**

The Philia Dialogue is premised on the belief that deep thinking, conversation, dialogue, writing, application, action and reflection are equally critical to fully appreciating the dimensions of caring citizens and inclusive communities.

Philia has seven key initiatives:

1. **To explore and mature the paradigm of citizenship** – to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of *philia* through writing, publication and engagement with public intellectuals and thinkers.
2. **To serve as a resource to policy makers** – to support policy makers and funders interested in pursuing the implications of *philia* for statute, regulation and funding criteria.
3. **Organizational transformation** – to work with organizations interested in infusing Philia concepts throughout their organizations.
4. **Dialogues** – to sponsor public dialogues on core principles and such themes as Time and Community, Reconciliation, Law and Community.
5. **Website** – to maintain an interactive website ([www.philia.ca](http://www.philia.ca)).
6. **Youth initiative** – to engage youth in an exploration of Philia concepts.
7. **Partnerships and alliances** – to align with groups, organizations and coalitions pursuing similar goals and objectives.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges facing our communities and our society are daunting. To respond

we will need the participation and contribution of everyone. We cannot afford to waste any of our precious resources. The Philia initiative believes it is our shared responsibility to uncover and mobilize the latent capacity of all citizens. Fortunately, life is full of mystery and pleasant surprises. From an overlooked and unexpected source exists wisdom, experience and expertise to lend to our common undertaking: to nurture and inspire belonging and meaning in our society. People with disability have both the capacity and the determination to contribute to the common good. It surely makes common sense to include everyone in this shared undertaking.