

## A discussion paper by Bronwyn Drainie

### **PREFACE**

In order to keep this paper focussed on the large communications themes you have set for yourselves, I've decided to stay away from two areas of detail that could provoke endless discussion and take up valuable time.

1. I will use the phrase "voluntary sector" exclusively to describe the wide range of institutions under discussion, and will not worry about competing labels.
2. I will take a broad and inclusive approach to defining the sector, and will not pause to consider who's in and who's out.

Because this paper concentrates on an open-ended exploration of ideas rather than a polarized debate amongst individuals, I have included most quotations anonymously. It's generally not so critical who said what as that we listen to and consider the ideas expressed. At the end of the paper, I have appended a list of all the people I interviewed as part of my research.

It's essential to state at the outset that the over-arching goal of the ideas put forth in this paper is the long-term health of the voluntary sector. There is some discouragement out there, to be sure, but in the course of my interviews I was struck, as always, by the high level of passion, dedication and creativity people bring to this work, and their determination to see the sector and its values prevail in Canadian society.

My thanks to the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, especially its vice-president of public affairs, Gordon Floyd, and to the Joint Table on Sectoral Awareness, for the opportunity to explore such a vast, interesting and important subject.

*Bronwyn Drainie*  
*Toronto, March 2001*

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Fifteen years ago in Toronto, the United Way invited three hundred leaders of the voluntary sector together to help plot the future of voluntarism in Canada. After three intense days of talks, papers and small group sessions, although there was strong support expressed for increasing diversity, heightening awareness and coalition-building, the

number one result was starkly clear: "No collective priorities emerged and there was no consensus on a structure for the sector as a whole."

To put it mildly, such a statement is discouraging if the exercise of the day is "Telling Our Story: Communicating the Value of Philanthropy and the Voluntary Sector." If there is no sense of unity or common purpose to the sector, then no matter how large it is, how many people it employs, how many dollars it commands or volunteer hours it clocks, it may not have a story to tell, or at least not one that anyone will care to listen to.

However, things have changed rather dramatically in Canada since 1986, and it is the contention of the organizers of this symposium that the time is now ripe to begin tackling the serious problems of invisibility, inarticulateness and lack of communications skills that bedevil the voluntary sector.

### **Why is the time ripe?**

For at least three reasons: the public's self-interest, politicians' awareness, and confidence in the sector.

1. **Self-interest.** The Maclean's Global Poll which came out in January 2001 noted a startling change in Canadian attitudes. Concern over social issues had been so low that it didn't even register in the first 11 years of the Maclean's survey. But, as Allan Gregg reported, "All that started to change in 1996, when we found 11 percent mentioning social issues as their dominant, top-of-mind concern. Today, that number has grown to almost half the population as social issues eclipse any other category by a ratio of more than 4:1." Does this mean that we have stopped worrying about jobs and been seized by a long-dormant humanitarian impulse? Of course not. It means the boomers are hitting fifty and are beginning to obsess about health care, first for their parents and then for themselves. For many, though, self-interest in a crumbling healthcare system may be the first step towards an understanding of the need for a well-supported community sector. From the sector's point of view, an aging public's self-interest can be regarded as the thin end of the wedge.

2. **Politicians' awareness.** The elimination of deficits has been the one-note song of Canadian politicians since the late 80s. The winning of that battle has freed politicians to think about other things and to survey the collateral damage. They have not made the leap to the central value of the voluntary sector, not quite yet. Still, journalists have noted that federal ministers - powerful ones like Paul Martin, Jane Stewart and Pierre Pettigrew - have begun mentioning the phrase 'civil society' in their speeches. It's not a revolution, but it is a clear sign of fertile ground. The targeting in January's Throne Speech of a hitherto ignored issue like adult literacy is another indicator of change in governmental thinking patterns.

3. **Confidence in the sector.** Who do you trust these days? According to "Talking About Charities", the Muttart Foundation's recent look at

Canadians' opinions of registered charities, "charitable workers" ranked very high, just below nurses and doctors, on the question of trust. This put them three ranks above business leaders and miles ahead of politicians. 75% of those polled said charities understand Canadians' needs better than government and 66% said they did a better job of meeting those needs than government does. Moreover, a study last year by the Institute for Research in Public Policy, headed by Hugh Segal, found that interest groups beat political parties by a 3-to-1 margin in the public's view of who's effective in influencing public policy. So you have a public with a growing, albeit self-interested awareness of social issues, and a confidence in the trustworthiness and efficacy of the sector, combined with a lot of politicians casting about for their next signature tune. Election strategists would call these 'winning conditions' for the voluntary sector.

### **Urgency**

Another aspect of the timing question, though, is not so positive. There is a struggle for core values going on in Canadian society, and the free market advocates are winning that struggle. The essence of their 'story' is that progress, prosperity and well-being are all the result of low taxes, limited government and unfettered competition. Their think tanks and the corporate media have been broadcasting this message so successfully for so long now that it no longer sounds like a message: it just sounds like reality. (It wasn't always like this. Can you remember a time, not that long ago, when 'business' was so marginal in the public sphere that there was just one page of business news in all the major dailies, tucked back behind the sports? Business sections in newspapers began to grow after the OPEC oil crisis of 1973, but it's salutary to remember that times, and the relative importance of values, do change.)

From their central vantage point, the disciples of the free market are now articulating values that are being accepted in large measure by other sectors of society. The current fixation in the voluntary sector with numerical outcomes or indicators, whether one agrees with their validity or not, can clearly be seen as a result of 'bottom-line thinking.' A foundation director I spoke to warned that the voluntary sector will be squeezed out entirely if it doesn't figure out how to communicate a valid alternative to the market approach. He gave the example of health care. Business is already saying, "You know, the voluntary sector represents an inefficient, second-rate, bleeding-heart approach to things like home care, whereas we can handle the work professionally, cheaply and efficiently. We can do this better." So one paradigm can quite quickly be replaced by another if people aren't paying attention.

### **Correcting Misperceptions**

The other compelling reason to start speaking up more effectively is that there are damaging misperceptions floating out there about the voluntary sector. Most of them have to do with the sector's professional core of workers.

"Admin costs are too high." Publish the salaries and let people judge.

"It's all volunteers so it shouldn't cost anything." Publish the research that shows how much volunteer work is leveraged by one well-organized staffer.

"I have no time to volunteer because on the weekends I sell hotdogs at the arena to raise money for my son's hockey team." Expand the understanding of voluntarism so that everyone who is involved feels involved.

The Talking About Charities report confirmed what we all know intuitively. Those Canadians who have the greatest understanding of what charities do are **most** inclined to trust them and to agree that they need more money, and **least** inclined to want to put limits on advocacy or administrative expenses. In other words, familiarity breeds support.

### **The Opposing View**

While canvassing opinions from many sectoral leaders for this paper, I came across a substantial number of people who felt that trying to tell the Big Story of the voluntary sector was either impossible, boring, misguided or governmentally motivated to the detriment of the sector. (Virtually everyone agreed, on the other hand, that encouraging and helping the constituent groups within the sector to tell their own stories was valuable and indeed, essential.)

Certainly the complexity and diversity of the sector, which is its greatest strength, is paradoxically its greatest weakness when it comes to telling a unified story.

Certainly the higher values that the sector speaks to - citizen participation, the three pillars of society, the common good - are terribly abstract and of scant general interest.

Certainly the rhetoric from governments about 'strengthening' the voluntary sector has not, up to this point, been accompanied by enough action to convince very many that it is more than rhetoric.

And certainly the constituent groups within the voluntary sector worry that they are being asked to sign on to yet another national initiative from which they may not derive any clear benefit and which may vie for public attention with the more focussed work they do. As one executive director told me, "If this macro-story group starts trying to do PSAs, now they're competing with me. No way."

### **Media Interest**

Nevertheless, the pro-Big Story arguments listed above about timing, urgency and the correction of misperceptions can be bolstered by one further compelling reason: the elite media in this country care about this story. While the small stories of heartwarming or can-do philanthropy are a very hard sell to the major dailies and TV networks, the big story of a sector flexing its muscle can catch their attention. As one national editor put it, "We believe we are there essentially to monitor power and shifts in power. If the voluntary sector is being

forced to assume more responsibility and intends to band together to command more power in the public arena, that could be a story for us." The issue of advocacy is of particular interest in this regard, he added. Another high-level executive stressed journalism's all-consuming interest in change: "The media is a very primitive animal. If something moves, we follow it. Don't expect us to pay attention to you when you're standing still. As soon as something starts to change, let us know."

### **What's the Story?**

So what exactly has changed since, say, 1986 that might make the discrete members of the voluntary sector see themselves as part of a larger entity with an important story to tell? From my many interviews with sectoral leaders and thinkers, three general themes emerged, any one of which might provide the central focus for the Big Story, depending on the direction that appeals to symposium participants. I see these themes as 1) practical, 2) results-based and 3) inspirational.

### **The Practical Story**

Governments have downsized and eliminated billions of dollars that either used to provide services directly to the public or used to flow to agencies to provide those services. Government downsizing has been disastrous for the voluntary sector, but from a communications perspective, it creates a common story where none existed before. Nothing brings people together like a threat to their common existence. Here's how three of the people I talked to articulated the bare bones of the story:

"The government's role in society is being compromised and we are not equipped to pick up the slack."

"Philanthropy is a wonderful thing, but it's not here to replace government."

"The community sector is dying trying to deal with the casualties of the leaner and more 'efficient' state."

And as an academic pointed out to me, the fact that the federal government did not create a joint table on funding as part of the Voluntary Sector Initiative is rather ominous: do they not intend to deal with this problem at all? If government will not, then the volunteer sector must. And since every single organization in the voluntary sector, from massive to miniscule, has been affected by this changing relationship with government, there is probably a common story to be told.

The problem with this story is that it plays into the unpleasant stereotype of the voluntary sector that exists in the minds of business leaders, the media and the public: These people are always whining. It's all about the money. They're pleaders not leaders.

Perhaps this is a story that needs to be narrowly focussed towards government, while a different story-telling approach needs to be taken towards the broader society.

### **The Results-Based Story**

In recent years, the research and development (R&D) function of the voluntary sector has been growing dynamically. People get a passion to try a new approach, they think it through alone or in small groups, they dig up a little funding for a pilot project, they try it, they fine-tune it, they involve others, they enlarge it. If it works, they often turn to either government or business to take it to scale. This is a time-honoured pattern that hasn't changed much over the millennia, but because of the muted voice of the voluntary sector and the stentorian tones of business and government, that crucial incubating function of the sector tends to be ignored. We have the hi-tech business sector to thank for making the notion of incubation sound sexy and interesting these days, and the voluntary sector can legitimately piggy-back on that notion. What all those little dot-com start-ups do in Silicon Valley before they get swallowed up by Bill Gates? That's what we do too.

Examples abound. Last year at this symposium, Tom Axworthy talked about the anti-slavery leagues that worked for a hundred years to bring about the abolition of that hated and deeply-entrenched institution. In Canada, the existence of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms can be directly linked back to a complex web of women's groups, native groups, labour groups and immigrants' groups. A taken-for-granted effort like newspaper collection and recycling, now handled by government and business, began with community and neighbourhood paper drives during wartime. Immigrant settlement in this country, of such enormous benefit to the society at large, is almost entirely handled by volunteer sector groups within various ethnic communities. The National Child Benefit reform, which guarantees children the same level of support whether their parents are working poor or on welfare, was "incubated" for many years by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy before Paul Martin and his provincial counterparts agreed to take it up. AIDS groups in Canada, through a strategy of advocacy-plus-research (or "demonstrations and documents", as they call it) moved a reluctant Canadian government to provide desperately-needed medicines and treatments for AIDS sufferers.

The results-based story is a powerful one that should be exploited, but it has one drawback. It's a story that tends to focus on the past rather than the future: by the time the story is there to be told, it's over, and therefore falls into the static category that our media executive admitted he wouldn't be all that interested in pursuing. But there are worthwhile audiences for this story: business development groups, seed funders in government and Canadian history programmes in schools, to mention a few.

### **The Inspirational Story**

This story is unquestionably the most powerful, but also the most

controversial among members of the voluntary sector itself. It probably deserves the lion's share of debate and discussion at the symposium.

There is no need to tell those of you already in this sector that this work affirms, enhances and can profoundly change and inspire your life. If you didn't feel that from your personal experience, you probably wouldn't hang around for the lousy coffee, the eccentric hours, the lack of societal attention and the crummy (or non-existent) pay. The problem is that when it comes to trying to include more Canadians in the deep personal fulfilment of philanthropy, you are running out of people who get the message.

The 1997 National Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating has provided the basic analysis: one-quarter of Canadians do three-quarters of all the giving and volunteering, and they are older, religious, well-educated and living outside big cities. This cohort of individuals get their personal fulfilment from doing their duty, a spiritually-based duty towards fellow human beings who are less fortunate than they. There was a time, not so long ago, when virtually the entire population of Canada was imbued with this value, so it's not surprising that our philanthropic institutions have evolved in lock-step with it. (It's also not surprising that when you ask Canadians what groups fall within the voluntary sector, they always leave out arts, sports and recreation groups. Of course they do - those activities all feel far too enjoyable to crowd under the gloomy umbrella of duty.)

So the question becomes: to whom are you talking? If you tell the story of that old, worthy, aid-based, duty-based philanthropy, with Mother Teresa as its prime exemplar, you will strike a common chord with the saints in the last paragraph, but you will leave most other Canadians cold. If you want to talk to the other three-quarters of the population, you have to tell an entirely different story, a story that is much more about personal satisfaction and mutual support than about duty, much more about participation, choice and inspiration than about being a good person.

Fortunately, it happens that large parts of the voluntary sector are moving in new directions that dovetail with the desires and values of younger Canadians. Many domestic charities - perhaps taking their lead from international charities which have learned from their clients that they want partnerships, not begging-bowls - have begun to move from aid-based to developmentally-based models of philanthropy. Organizations like FoodShare in Toronto with its emphasis on community gardens and good nutrition, or New Dawn Enterprises in Cape Breton which builds and staffs much-needed housing by and for the community, are examples of the developmental model. In other words, people are being 'taught to fish' all over this country. And this new paradigm means that philanthropic relationships are all up for grabs. There is more room for creativity on the part of both donors and recipients, there are opportunities to build much more equal partnerships and there are increased demands from donors for

meaningful involvement and clear accountability. Here is what a number of the sectoral leaders I spoke to had to say about all this:

“Organizations in the sector have it backwards. They see their work as central, but they are simply an instrument, a vehicle, through which all of us can express our innate philanthropic impulses. They have to learn how to communicate meaningfully to us, not specifically about what they do but about what it can do for US to become involved with THEM.”

“The challenge for the sector is not to ‘tell our story’ to a majority of people who are not interested, but to find ways to connect with new communities about why philanthropy is a core human value and how they might want to express it in their lives.”

“The message can no longer be: trust us, we’ll do good. It can’t be: give us the money, we’ll find a solution. It has to be a message that deals with citizenship, engagement and personal choice.”

While researching this paper, I happened to have four 19-year-olds sitting around my dinner table one evening so I asked them if they volunteered. They recoiled at the word and denied they would ever do anything so uncool. “At this stage of my life,” said one, “I only do things for money or fun.” Then they rhymed off their activities: coaching kids’ baseball and hockey, helping out at daycamps, Big Brothering. They did all these things, they insisted, simply because they were fun. One did a more traditional volunteer job: he regularly cleared the snow for a 90-year-old widow down the street. “I figure I can put that on my resume,” he cracked, just to dispel any do-gooder image he might project. These kids are the audience for the new story of the voluntary sector. And so are their parents, the Baby Boomers, the least committed and most self-involved generation in history.

One of the best things about going through a communications exercise is that the institution concerned has to dig deeply into its mission, its values, its *raison d’être* and its approach. If it cannot justify and articulate these things clearly to itself, it may have more than a communications problem. So for the voluntary sector as a whole, the imperative to “tell our story” literally forces all participants to confront the aid-based vs. developmentally-based dichotomy, as well as the organization-based vs. people-based dichotomy. The two approaches are far too different to produce a single compelling story.

### **Other Stories**

Beyond the three themes outlined above, a few other key stories are worth telling:

- If you don’t have social capital (as described by writers like Jane Jacobs, Robert Putnam or Rosabeth Moss Kanter - safe streets, dynamic communities, lots of cultural and recreational activities) you will not get financial capital or intellectual capital moving into the neighbourhood.

- The voluntary sector is a wonderful place to work, and it needs its share of Canada's best and brightest. It has very high personnel standards. Yes, there will be a big dollar sacrifice, but this is where the causes are that make a difference in people's lives. This is a legitimate, challenging and rewarding career path.
- A culture of big bucks and celebrities has affected the public's expectations. People only pay attention when a Terry Fox raises millions for cancer research. It often does not seem to be enough to quietly go about the business of improving individuals' lives or the quality of life in a community. How can we make "ordinary" philanthropy look attractive?
- In a multicultural society, the basic philanthropic impulse channels itself through many different cultural/religious approaches and practical expressions. We need to identify these, talk about them, see them demonstrated and observe how they can all work to achieve common or at least similar goals.

Finally in this section, a challenge, a question and a bit of eloquence:

The challenge is to do an imaginative exercise: imagine a day (a week, a year) in your community WITHOUT the voluntary sector.

The question comes from the world of PR: What do you want people five years from now to be saying and thinking about the voluntary sector?

The eloquence comes from Mark Kingwell, Canada's hip young philosopher-prince, in his most recent book, *The World We Want: Virtue, Vice and the Good Citizen*:

We are, finally, happier not with more stuff but with more meaning: more creative leisure time, stronger connections to groups of friends, deeper commitment to common social projects, and a greater opportunity to reflect. Nor is this basic social commitment something we should pursue for ourselves alone, a project simply to promote our personal happiness. At its best, it is an expression of commonality that creates something greater than the sum of its - let us be honest - often self-interested and distracted members. It creates a community.

### **How Do We Tell the Story?**

The first half of this discussion paper concentrated on the Big Story of the voluntary sector: **why** it's important to tell it, and **what** it might be.

Now let's turn to practicalities: **how** and **to whom** should the story be told? Regarding the Big Story, the newly-minted Voluntary Sector Initiative would appear to be the only existing effort that has the appropriate breadth to be able to take on this task. But will it? As one sectoral leader said rather bluntly, "Ultimately, if voluntary sector people think this is important it will get done. If not, it won't." In this

paper, though, it's worth broadening the discussion to include how to tell the small stories that emerge out of each of the constituent groups that comprise the voluntary sector as a whole. (These are the sorts of stories you see interspersed through this paper, stories that demonstrate both the staggering diversity of the sector and the enormous efficacy of individuals or small groups in bringing about social and cultural change.)

Many of the people I interviewed expressed support for the telling of stories, but serious doubts about the ability of voluntary sector groups to do this work. An academic gave me this perspective: "I see organizations that are terribly over-taxed, trying to deliver services and constantly fund-raising. I think it's unrealistic and maybe unfair to start pressuring these groups to get more media-savvy and out there telling their stories. I think a big communications push is largely beyond most of them." On the other hand, an executive director of a successful national organization says: "You can't possibly do effective fund-raising if you can't tell a compelling story. Take at least 15% of your fund-raising budget and put it into communications." He also cautions against doing this work on the cheap. "Pro bono is not a particularly good way to go for groups trying to create a media presence. Ad agencies tend to give that work to juniors who love to experiment with 'way out' stuff they can't try out on the paying clients. This doesn't necessarily serve your group's image well."

It's worth noting that some of Canada's private foundations are strongly supportive of communications initiatives by their client groups. None of them that I'm aware of go so far as the Cadillac Community Foundation in Michigan which insists that all of its grantees send out their own news releases about their grants and what their programmes will do. But several of the Canadian foundations seem to be prepared to put resources into helping their clients either to buy professional help in this area or to develop better communications skills in-house.

### **Talking to the Public, Through the Media**

Many, many voluntary organizations in this country have either a horror story to tell about 'bad' media attention, a lament about being completely ignored by the media, or both. How does this relationship look from the media side? In the interest of lively discussion, here are some of the (often contradictory) opinions and suggestions I garnered from talking with a number of Canadian journalists representing large and small media outlets:

"Here's how it works. Reporters suggest stories they think editors want. Editors O.K. stories they think owners want. You have to get to the owners. Voluntary groups at all levels should be inviting the top media people in their communities onto their boards. One, this will give them media advice, which they need badly. Two, it sensitizes media types to the issues. Third, if the relationship takes, media owners may invite leaders of the sector onto their boards."

"The image of journalism is very low in the public eye. Building a bridge to the voluntary sector at the owner or board level can work to the media's advantage. Charities have something the media needs: credibility."

"If I'm a local publisher in a chain and I argue that it makes good business sense to cooperate with local groups, head office will buy it. From an editor's point of view, you're working in a different context. Generally the less you think about the owners and what they want, the better."

"The jargon-laden speech from these groups is awful. Nothing turns reporters off faster."

"Come up with a feature idea that incorporates your issue - complete with interviewees. In the downsized climate of newsrooms, these charity groups have to do some of what used to be our work. You may not like it but that's the reality. Small papers have NO resources."

"There's a tendency, left over from the 60s probably, to want to stress the communal or group nature of your endeavour. Reporters and the public want stories of individuals. Look at Terry Fox."

"If you're going to call a press conference, have something serious to say. Local papers are way too stretched these days to send reporters out to non-events."

"Not-for-profits come to the media at fund-raising time and demand that we tell their story. It's such naked self-interest. Granted, business and government do the same thing, flogging a new product or policy, but there is both a desperation and a self-righteousness to the charity groups that puts journalists' backs up immediately."

"Get to know your city editor. Prepare a good package of information, and then just phone up or walk into the newsroom with it. Nobody does this."

"We are fed up to here with No-Paper Day and Breast Cancer Week and Black History Month. Media do respond to these ploys but we all resent being guilt-tripped into covering issues - never stories! - due to artificial proclamations like these. If it happens every year and nobody dies, it's not a story."

"Not-for-profits are just as bad as business for trying to keep their operations hidden. My feeling is, if you're keeping secrets, you should be looking very seriously at your operation and asking yourselves what's going on that you're so determined the public not find out about."

“When a fund-raising goal is met, don’t send out a photo advisory for a cheque presentation. I view this as a lame way to celebrate when a million stories could be told.”

“We’re not interested specifically in you or your group. We’re interested in your expertise and credibility around some issue of public policy.”

“How come we never see sitcoms with people volunteering or writing a cheque for charity or working in a drop-in centre? The voluntary sector is completely invisible in the popular culture. It needs to learn what business does so well: product placement.”

### **Talking to the community**

There’s a project that began four years ago in the Kitchener-Waterloo area of southern Ontario that demonstrates the power of creating a story and communicating that story effectively to everyone in the voluntary sector. It also demonstrates some of the pitfalls of the ‘story’ approach. The project is called Opportunities 2000, it was an initiative of a Christian community agency called Lutherwood, and it set as its initial goal lifting 2000 households out of poverty by the year 2000. This was a catchy, attention-grabbing indicator, and Op2000, as it’s known, had no trouble attracting \$4.5 million from foundations and other strategic funders. The Royal Bank, for example, gave \$240,000. By almost any standard you care to name, Op2000 has been and continues to be a huge success. To date it has involved 83 community partners from business, government, the voluntary sector and low-income groups themselves; it has created a Leadership Roundtable which is engaging the entire community in the challenge of lessening poverty; it has got the local university, the local media and the local Chamber of Commerce in the loop; and it has had a positive impact on the lives of 2200 families. It has created a community-based problem-solving process that everyone in the community is aware of and supports. When the region is polled, people indicate that their most important top-of-mind issue is poverty, even though Kitchener-Waterloo has the lowest poverty rate in Canada.

What Op2000 has not managed to do is what it advertised it would do: move 2000 families out of poverty by the year 2000, or even 2001. It turns out, of course, that a simple numerical slogan cannot begin to capture the complexity of something like poverty, which can be (and is) calculated at least five different ways in this country. The pressure to create a good story twisted this community into seeing itself as failing when it could not deliver on the numbers. Paul Born, the organizing genius behind Op2000, betrays the conflict he feels about all this. At one point he says, “We’ve simply decided that we’re not even going to define poverty anymore. It takes up way too much of our energy.” But two minutes later he says, “We are obsessed about the numbers, and I just can’t believe how elusive they are.” Nevertheless, he is adamant that creating the ‘2000 by 2000’ slogan was the right thing to do. “Unless you have these one-liners to inspire people, you can’t get anywhere.”

There are those who disagree with Born, and Op2000 has generated a serious and extremely interesting debate over the use of indicators and outcomes in measuring the success of social service work. This may seem far removed from the question of 'telling our story' but it isn't. Funders want clear outcomes because of the increasingly business-oriented model they use to evaluate projects; the media wants clear outcomes because they are easy and eye-catching to report on; and funders want to fund projects that the media will report on. The pressure to simplify complex stories is relentless.

Still, the lessons Born has learned through this whole process are worth noting. "We've learned that messaging isn't just about measuring, it's about inspiring people's hearts." (He's right: think of "Cancer Can Be Beaten", perhaps the most successful slogan ever developed in the voluntary sector.) "The old message of this sector," continues Born, "was depressing and played on guilt. Ours plays on possibilities and opportunities." Finally, he notes that when they started, the Op2000 people were not afraid to admit they didn't really know what they were doing and whether it would be successful or not. He notes, "That kind of risk-taking is a very attractive message these days."

### **Telling Funder Stories**

We tend to think of philanthropic stories as always being about recipients and how our help has affected their lives. But in the individualistic and success-driven culture we all inhabit, it's just as important to tell the stories of who's giving their money away, why and to what ends. This encourages others to do the same. The funding world is changing just as rapidly as the recipient world, so that the old paternalistic model ("a little for the symphony, a little for the hospital, a little for the Old Boys' fund") is pretty well out-of-date.

Many of the new foundations are based in the new economy and they are very different. Their founders have extraordinary confidence in their own ability to succeed. They are sometimes what is described as "startled money" and their motivation tends to be a combination of guilt, luck, gratitude, boredom and a desire for meaning. They treat their philanthropic work just like their entrepreneurial work: rather than having a specific focus such as children or kidney disease, they scan the marketplace asking where the needs are, where the gaps are and how to leverage money most successfully. Some of them don't stick the family name up front anymore: there's the Be-A-Light Foundation, the Endswell, or the initials-only EJLB Foundation of Quebec.

In the next few years, indications are that Quebec may become the locus of the Canadian foundation story. The province already houses most of Canada's biggest private foundations: McConnell, the Bronfman cluster, Webster, Molson, Bombardier, de Seve, Coutu and now a huge new one, Chagnon, set up with money from the Videotron sale. And there are others like Paul Desmarais giving away vast amounts without a foundation structure per se. Many of the new-

economy philanthropists will emerge from Quebec as well, such as Daniel Langlois. Langlois created SoftImage, the pioneering software company that Hollywood adores and that Microsoft bought. As a philanthropist, his interest is in completely independent exploration of advanced artistic technologies: in Montreal he built Ex Centris, the most sophisticated movie house in the world, in order to show leading-edge non-commercial cinematic works.

Quebec developed completely differently from the rest of Canada, philanthropically speaking: almost all social services were administered by the Roman Catholic Church until the Quiet Revolution, at which point they transferred directly to the powerful Quebec government without ever passing through an independent, secular voluntary sector with its base of private donor support. But things are changing rapidly now: Centraide (Montreal's United Way) reports that ten years ago they had only 200 donors who gave \$1000 or more, but by the year 2000 that number had grown to 3200. It may be that the lack of a large institutionalized voluntary sector in the province will allow Quebec to leap from the duty-bound past to the personalized future more quickly than English Canada. The foundation 'story', with its freer and more individualistic approach to philanthropy, is still emerging, but it is worth keeping the sector's collective eye on.

### **GiveTV?**

How better to tell your story than with your own TV channel. Such an animal exists, as of seven months ago, in England. The Community Channel is one of the digital options on Sky Digital, owned and run by the Media Trust, a charity which also owns the Guardian newspaper. Horribly under-funded and only on the air for 3 hours a day, the station is depending for most of its programming needs on contractually-produced films about the work of charities that normally don't get much of a showing. There's an infostrip on the screen offering donating and volunteering opportunities, but the producers know that "no one would watch a channel that kept actively asking for something." (The English, of course, are not subjected to PBS!) The focus is on the fascinating work charities do, not on soliciting funds. Airtime is free for the charities, although the owners are thinking of charging the large ones a fee, or else bringing in corporate sponsors. They are also exploring the tele-shopping route, since so many charities now produce goods for sale. A quick check with the CRTC indicated that they have never received an application for a Canadian charities channel. At a slightly less ambitious level, a Canadian foundation director I spoke to said he's always dreamed about mounting a cable show called "Foundation Works" which would highlight projects across the country which foundations either initiate or support.

### **Telling Tales in School**

If the voluntary sector is serious about engaging Canadians with its story and its values, it needs to turn to the classroom. There is movement towards "mandatory voluntarism" as part of high school curricula in some provinces, if one can get past the oxymoronic nature

of such an endeavour. And students do seem clued in to the idea that volunteer work looks good on a resume. But the community underpinnings of the civil society are not addressed pedagogically in our education system; neither is the voluntary sector seriously included in the range of career choices that teenagers are encouraged to consider.

I would draw the symposium's attention to a project recently completed by the Toronto chapter of CERIS (Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement). It's a CD called "Strangers Becoming Us", structured into 10 programme segments and distributed to 6500 schools across Canada for use with students in Grades 4 to 6. It teaches kids about Canada's immigration policies, how they've changed over the years, the difference between immigrants and refugees, and how immigrants are changing Canadian culture. The material is quite good - although a visual component would make it more compelling. What is particularly interesting is its method of distribution, through an online company called Classroom Connections. This company was started by an individual parent, Heather MacTaggart, who was keenly aware of the lack of new learning materials in today's Canadian classrooms and saw a need to be filled. Her catalogue includes a resource kit on volunteering produced by Volunteer Canada, one on becoming a "reading buddy" produced by Frontier College, and several others produced by private business concerns such as Ralston Purina and the National Post. What is fascinating about this approach is that the federal government has had to create an evaluation body called Curriculum Services Canada to screen the material for suitability and academic standards. New technologies and distribution systems are requiring Ottawa to get involved in what has always been a sacrosanct provincial jurisdiction, education. It might be worthwhile for the voluntary sector to think about creating classroom materials that could be distributed in such a manner.

### **Working on Business**

The uneasy relationship between business and the voluntary sector has a great deal to do with the societal undervaluing of the sector. When asked how he and his friends view the sector, here is what a businessman who sits on many volunteer boards had to say:

1. It's a key part of our social life. There are balls and parties and fund-raisers all the time. Certain charities are "hot", not because of anything to do with their issues but because of the business or celebrity names attached to them.
2. We know we've been recruited for one reason only: to raise money. Most of us are content to stick with that role and leave the running of the organization to the professionals. A small minority would like to get more involved; sometimes this is encouraged by the charity's management, often it's not.

3. We expect charities to run inefficiently and we don't think it's our job to change that. Another executive was more adamant about the way not-for-profits conduct themselves. "Business people are often appalled by the inefficiency. So much money and time are wasted. I don't believe business people think this is OK: I think it turns them off. A major priority of the charitable sector should be to adopt, not business values, but business techniques."

If the voluntary sector wants to be treated as more than the pet project of wealthy corporations and individuals, it will have to deal with this perception of inefficiency. On the other hand, members of the sector may decide that other values - passion, engagement and autonomy, for example - are worth more than efficiency.

### **Talking Online**

For a sector as diffuse and diverse as this one, the Internet is already proving to be a boon, albeit only for those comfortable with the technology. Calgary Together, a project of the Calgary Foundation, is an ambitious website geared towards online community building. Visitors to the site can add their events, register their groups, tell their stories and connect with funders or applicants. My repeat visits to the site proved frustrating - it's a somewhat chaotic and complicated place - and it was disappointing to see that few people were using the discussion groups. But it is far more interesting and potentially more useful than tamer, less interactive sites.  
(<http://www.calgarytogether.com/>)

Broadcaster and activist Judy Rebick is the publisher of Rabble.ca, an online news and opinion magazine and a community site, side by side, which is launching on April 18th. The site bills itself as "news for the rest of us," and sees itself acting as a counterweight to the corporately-controlled right-leaning mainstream media in Canada. The problem has been how to finance a news site on the Internet, since advertisers are less than enthusiastic. (As opposed to newspapers or TV, advertisers can tell exactly how many people are clicking on their ads on the Internet and they don't like the numbers they see). Rabble's solution is to finance the news-gathering side with a revenue-generating cross-Canada community website which will contain events listings, job listings, an experts index for the media and "community partnerships". For a fee, Rabble will monitor a group's website, choose interesting material from it, highlight and discuss it on the Rabble site and then provide the usual link. This is a highly risky venture but all the more intriguing for that. The news side will clearly appeal to the activist crowd while the community side could fill an important communications need for the sector as a whole.

### **Gillerizing the Sector**

One of my interview subjects suggested that the way to raise awareness of the voluntary sector might be to create a gala award event modelled on the Giller Prize, which in its six years of existence has hugely increased the profile of Canadian fiction and had an enormous impact on book sales in this country. A book like Gail

Anderson-Dargatz's "A Cure for Death by Lightning", which in pre-Giller days might have sold a respectable 5,000 copies, was short-listed for the Giller and subsequently sold 75,000 copies in Canada.

But the prize has had an effect far beyond the lives of a few happy authors. The gala dinner held at the Four Seasons Hotel in Toronto every November brings together all the major literary players: the writers and their agents, the editors, designers and publishers, the critics and columnists, and the wholesale and retail booksellers. That single event has created an amazing amount of solidarity among all facets of the literary community. And the broadcasting of the dinner on Bravo! at least gives the general public a peek at the celebration.

Could something like the Giller be devised to honour voluntary sector heroes each year and give the whole community reason to celebrate? Attempts made so far, such as the Drucker Foundation or Fraser Institute awards, have neither been embraced by the sector nor generated any public profile. As Jack Rabinovitch, the founder of the Giller Prize, explained to me, "The Giller works because it's about one guy (me) honouring one person (my late wife) by giving one \$25,000 prize to one author in one place (Toronto). That makes it a simple story for the media to concentrate on." The voluntary sector, by contrast, is huge, multifaceted and pan-Canadian. Where would the money come from? How many prizes would be given? Who would host or 'front' the event? Where would the party take place? Who would get invited?

These are difficult questions. But, if a consortium of funders could create an endowment, and if a very high-profile host could be found, and if a rotation of cities could be agreed upon, and if the number of awards could be limited to no more than six, and if short films could be produced about each of the winners, and if a broadcaster would air the event, you would have created a powerful mechanism for showcasing the diversity and creativity of the sector to its own members and to the general public. Imagine yourself, a cancer society director, sitting at dinner with a museum curator on one side of you and an environmental activist on the other. It opens your mind.

What makes the Giller special, and different from other arts awards dinners in this country, is that the guests are all invited (mostly without mates) and do not have to buy tickets or tables. For a community like the voluntary sector, which tends to see itself as undervalued and unappreciated, it would be exciting to create an event that allowed it to bask in some much-deserved praise. But that means finding sustaining money up front.

### **Conclusions, If Any**

Telling the story of the voluntary sector is a large and difficult job, and may or may not be an initiative the sector wants to shoulder at this time. But the long-term health and future of the sector certainly depends, at the very least, on two major things: funding to do the aid-based part of the job well, and a clear picture within the sector of

where it is heading vis-à-vis Canadian society. Both of those imperatives require good communications, the first to governments, the second an ongoing and free-ranging debate among all participants in the sector itself. As for the general public, its support is essential to ensure adequate government funding, healthy donation levels and active participation. The message to the general public has to be:

This is a vital and growing sector of Canadian life.

You'll want to be part of it. Get involved.

### **Questions To Consider**

This is a difficult and contentious subject, full of internal contradictions. Here are some of the questions that arise from the discussion paper, questions that might lead to fruitful debate. Of course each reader will have other questions and reactions to bring to the table as well.

1. Should the sector's goal be to tell: the practical story (re: needs), the results-based story (re: innovation), the inspirational story (re: personal satisfaction, participation and choice), or some other story?
2. What do you want Canadians 5 years from now to be saying and thinking about the voluntary sector?
3. Everyone interviewed seemed to agree that the values of the voluntary sector are a key component of the 'story', and yet many also agreed that "the higher values the sector speaks to ... are terribly abstract and of scant general interest." How can this contradiction be addressed?
4. Is it possible to reconcile the aid-based and the developmentally-based approaches to philanthropy, or do hard choices need to be made about which story to tell?
5. Is it possible to reconcile the organization-centred story with the people-centred story, or do hard choices need to be made here as well about which story to tell?
6. Is there one story for government, another for business, a third for the media and general public, and a fourth for the sector itself? If so, what is the essence of each of the stories? Can any of them be combined?
7. If numbers (indicators, benchmarks, outcomes) make a good story for funders and the media, but also exert enormous pressure on already stressed organizations, are they worth pursuing?
8. Are messages about the voluntary sector's efficiency and economic impact worth pursuing, or do they contradict some of the sector's core values?

9. Is it possible for the religious and secular segments of the voluntary sector to tell a unified story, or should they each be left alone to determine what stories will appeal to their own constituencies?

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## INTERVIEWS

Michael Adams - Environics, Toronto  
Robert Alain - EJLB Foundation, Montreal  
Arnold Amber - CBC-TV News, Toronto  
Donna Barker - IMPACS, Vancouver  
Ken Battle - Caledon Institute of Social Policy  
Joel Bell - corporate sector, Toronto  
Paul Born - Opportunities 2000, Kitchener-Waterloo  
Alan Broadbent - Maytree Foundation, Toronto  
Ed Broadbent - former federal NDP leader, Ottawa  
Kathy Brock - Public Policy in the 3rd Sector, Queen's University, Kingston  
Tim Brodhead - McConnell Foundation, Montreal  
Michèle Thibodeau-DeGuire - Centraide, Montreal  
Mira Dodig - Médecins Sans Frontières, Toronto  
Tracy Douglas - Volunteer Alberta, Calgary  
David Driscoll - VanCity, Vancouver  
Doug Firby - St. Catharine's Standard, St. Catharine's, Ontario  
Lysiane Gagnon - La Presse, Montreal  
Amanda Gibbs - IMPACS, Vancouver  
Nathan Gilbert - Laidlaw Foundation, Toronto  
Anne Golden - United Way of Greater Toronto  
Suzanne Golden - guidance counsellor, Winnipeg  
Bonnie Green - United Church of Canada, Toronto  
Lyndsay Green - information technology consultant, Toronto  
Marsha Hanen - ex-president University of Winnipeg, Victoria BC  
Shira Herzog - Kahanoff Foundation, Toronto  
Bonnie Johnson - Planned Parenthood, Ottawa  
Suanne Kelman - Ryerson School of Journalism, Toronto  
Jacky Kennedy - Greenest City, Toronto  
Bonnie Sherr Klein - KickstART, Vancouver  
Keith Ross Leckie - A Street Called Wanda, Toronto  
Mary Jo Leddy - Romero House, Toronto  
Marian Lepkin - 55 plus, Winnipeg  
Jan MacKie - The Spiral Garden, Toronto  
Patrick Martin - Globe and Mail, Toronto  
May Maskow - CERIS Toronto  
John Miller - Ryerson School of Journalism, Toronto  
Ratna Omidvar - Maytree Foundation, Toronto  
Manny Paris - Sun Youth, Montreal  
Charles Pascal - Atkinson Foundation, Toronto  
Andre Picard - Globe and Mail, Montreal  
Jack Rabinovitch - The Giller Prize, Toronto  
Pauline Raven - Apple Tree Landing, Canning, Nova Scotia  
Judy Rebick - rabble.ca, Toronto

Kristy Reiber - Timberwinds Stables, Lloydminster, Alberta  
Laurie Rektor - VSI Secretariat, Ottawa  
Mary Rowe - community animator, Owen Sound, Ontario  
Liz Rykert - MetaStrategies, Toronto  
Bernard St. Laurent - CBC Montreal  
Bill Saul - Kids' Help Phone, Toronto  
Nick Saul - Stop 103, Toronto  
Philip Slayton - corporate sector, Toronto  
Kate Smallwood - BC Endangered Species Coalition, Smithers, BC  
Cam Tait - Edmonton Journal, Edmonton  
E. V. Titheredge - 55 Plus, Winnipeg  
Sherri Torjman - Caledon Institute, Ottawa  
Diane Walker - corporate sector, Toronto  
Norman Webster - Webster Family Foundation, Montreal  
Julie White - Private Foundations Canada, Toronto  
Megan Williams - Canadian Conference of the Arts, Ottawa  
Eric Young - E.Y.E. Inc., Toronto

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## **APPENDIX: 12 STORIES FROM THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR**

1. In a low-income project in Scarborough, residents were complaining about teenagers drinking, fighting, smashing bottles and making mayhem on the property. The Alcohol Task Force of the City of Toronto met with the kids and asked what they needed to stop behaving this way. "We've got nothing to do," the kids told them, "that's why we drink. Build us a basketball court and things will change." The city paid for the court, the kids created an organization called TOSS (Teens Off Scarborough Streets) and the drinking problem stopped. Last heard from, the teens had created a library in the project, got local businesses to donate money for books and started a reading club for the next generation.

2. In 1987 film-maker Bonnie Sherr Klein suffered a devastating stroke which ultimately left her wheelchair-bound. Never one to sit still for long, however, she soon became an activist for the disabled community. This year she and the recently-created Society for Disability Arts and Culture have launched KickstART, an international disabled artists' festival that will happen in Vancouver from August 16 to 20. Featuring wheelchair ballet, stand-up comedy, film-making, choral singing, theatre and poetry, the festivities have already begun with a visual arts show at the Hong Kong Bank this spring entitled "Outside the Line: Self-Portraits of Artists with Disabilities." "The disabled are always portrayed by outsiders as either Super-Crip or Tiny Tim," says Klein. "It's way past time for our artists to be telling their own stories."

3. Rossbrook House in Winnipeg just celebrated its 25th anniversary. It's a drop-in centre in a poor neighbourhood known to locals as "Manitoba's largest Indian reservation." It was started by Sister

Geraldine MacNamara, a promising lawyer who worked for Legal Aid back in the 70s, until the day she returned to her order's house and found two teenagers asleep on the doorstep. On the spot Sister Mac's life changed: she quit her career, founded Rossbrook House and devoted the rest of her life to helping poor children. Since her death, other social activist nuns have taken over her work, and the centre has recently been expanded with government and business support. Open 365 days a year, till midnight on weekdays and round the clock on weekends, it offers kids "a constant alternative to the destructive environment of the streets."

4. The kids at Maurice Cody Public School in Toronto sure know how to walk. Last year they walked right across Canada - 7423 kilometers! Maurice Cody is one of more than 100 Ontario schools that uses the Walking Bus concept to encourage less pollution, more child fitness and the restoration of trust in neighborhoods. Greenest City is the environmental group that implements the Walking Buses, working with school principals, parents, public health staff, traffic experts and the local police. At Maurice Cody, the kids kept track on a map of all the kilometers they walked in a whole school year and they made it from St. John's to Vancouver. Along the way, they avoided the release of 2041 kilograms of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere!

6. At Sun Youth, a well-established community centre on St. Urbain St. in Montreal, they know that keeping the media fully informed is the best policy. "This past Christmas we got so much food that we invited the cameras in to shoot our full-to-bursting warehouse," says staff member Manny Paris. "We figured the public deserved to know how generous they had been. Of course it's a double-edged sword: every time the TV does a piece on us, there's a lineup of new clients at the door. But that's what we're here for." Sun Youth runs a food and clothing bank, a library, a computer lab, a day camp and the full gamut of emergency services. One of its regular donors gives the agency \$5000 every year just to buy bicycles. He remembers that when he was growing up dirt poor in the neighbourhood, a bike was what he always longed for.

5. Is the "digital divide" going to leave large chunks of Canada's population even further behind than they are now? In Canning, Nova Scotia, a village of some 800 households, a group called Apple Tree Landing wants to make sure that doesn't happen. In a test project, Apple Tree is working with 30 families in Canning to design and launch an interactive "family literacy" website, whose main goal is to get everyone in the household comfortable with computers. Hardware and software is being donated by corporate sponsors. The project tackles the group most likely to get left outside the Information Technology circle: rural families with young kids who live in low-income circumstances. The project is spearheaded by Pauline Raven, who organized, entirely by e-mail, the Wake-Up Call that made such a big noise across Canada about Ottawa's unfilled promise to eradicate child poverty by the year 2000.

7. One day last June, a quiet little street in west Toronto rang with Angolan and Cuban music while the smells of Rwandan, Mexican and Kurdish delicacies wafted on the summer air and a whole neighbourhood came out to dance. This was "A Street Called Wanda", an annual celebration of the vibrant community that has grown up in the past decade around Romero House, home to a group of non-status refugees and run by the indefatigable Sister Mary Jo Leddy. "Everybody was suspicious at first," says one of the area residents, "we weren't sure what these people were going to do to our property values. But the kids all started playing basketball together, and the refugees held open house parties at the drop of a hat, and you know what? They created a neighbourhood here where there really wasn't one before." Now they're looking to buy a fourth house, and the Canadian Auto Workers' Social Justice Fund have ponied up the first \$300,000.

8. Kate Smallwood is a wizard at online advocacy. From her home in Smithers, BC, she captains the BC Endangered Species Coalition, which is exploring how to create exciting, affordable websites for nonprofits, based on the principle of viral marketing, getting other people to spread the word for you. (Remember Doris Day?) Prior to the last federal election, the coalition came up with a cheeky image of Chretien with a marmot in one hand and a saltshaker in the other, and a website address: COOKED SPECIES.COM. Billboards around Vancouver drove people to the website, where they could send a free fax to the politicians. EXTINCTION SUCKS.COM is the coalition's general website. An arresting name, great images, transit and billboard ads, forays into pop culture (such as niche magazines): it's an approach that gets to the youth and urban female markets that traditional nonprofits don't touch.

9. Trying to reach the native community about health issues is tough. The EJLB Foundation, based in Quebec, asked Planned Parenthood to find a broadly-based, non-political First Nations group to work with in creating a series of handbooks, in English and various native languages, about teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Planned Parenthood found the Aboriginal Nurses' Association and the two groups set to work. The need for this kind of material is more than compelling: with the widespread poverty and abuse in the communities they serve, the nurses readily admit they don't know where to start. The nurses were brought together for two days and encouraged to choose their own models for conveying the information. All agreed that story-telling was the most effective model for the native community, so they're spending this year gathering stories. Communities with women chiefs have been the most open to the project.

10. Kids living in war zones need a lot more than food, medicine and a roof over their heads. They need safe spaces to explore the horrors they have experienced and the losses they have suffered. And they need to learn - or relearn - how to play. Canada, it turns out, is a pioneer in developing specialized programmes that bring art and play

and gardening together to help kids learn to live again. The Canadian branch of Medecins Sans Frontieres has just launched "More Than Bandages", a new mental health project that will involve training local artists, gardeners and other caregivers to work with children in refugee camps and other war-torn locales. "Our Western methods of counselling and psychotherapy don't always work," says MSF's Mira Dodig. "What we've learned is that kids express themselves much better through action than through words." The famous Butterfly Garden of Sri Lanka, on which some of this thinking is based, was created by Paul Hogan, a Canadian, who first developed his ideas about children, ecology, art and play with the Spiral Garden at the Bloorview MacMillan Centre in Toronto.

11. About 25 years ago, a group of senior citizens approached the University of Winnipeg, saying they wanted to further their studies - but on their own terms. Instead of just choosing whatever courses were on offer, they proposed creating their own seniors' committee which would canvas older students, find out what they'd like to study and whom they'd like to have teaching them. The elected committee meets each month, devising courses on everything from jazz to Darwin, from current Manitoba politics to climatology. No professor they've approached has ever turned them down. The 2-hour-a-week daytime courses are cheap: \$150 for the first four and \$10 for each additional one. Some students take as many as 8 in one year. Although quite a number of the students graduated from university decades ago, the majority of them went directly into the workforce from high school and are engaging in higher-level academic studies for the first time.

12. Timberwinds Stables in Lloydminster, Alberta is a place where anyone can learn to ride, from the fully abled to those with mild or severe disabilities: ADD, autism, cerebral palsy. It's also a place where skilled competitive riders come to train, and it's from the ranks of those competitive riders that Timberwinds finds many of the volunteers it needs to run its classes. Often 3 or 4 volunteers are required for each rider. "We used to call this therapeutic riding," says the stable's owner Kristy Reiber, "but we've changed our approach. The fact is that nobody is a natural on a horse to begin with, so the abled and disabled are mixed in and learning side by side." One severely autistic young rider couldn't talk about anything but baseball and airplanes when he came, but after several months he made a real connection to the horses and the volunteers, a mammoth step in communication.