

A Meditation¹ On Boards

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I hold [to] the idea that civility, understood as the willingness to engage in public discourse, is the first virtue of citizens. (Mark Kingwell)

... associations and the community they create are the forum within which citizenship can be expressed. Institutions by their managed structures are definitionally unable to act as forums for citizenship. Therefore, the vital centre of democracy is the community of associations. (John McKnight)

"Citizen" is of course just one role among others in a full and well-ordered life. We are also mothers and fathers, students and professionals, moviegoers and householders, and many other things besides. Even a cursory survey of the range of human life would have to include that we inhabit, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, at least six roles that are not distinctly political, Let's consider them for a moment We are (1) inquirers, seeking the truth about our lives and the universe in which we live. We are (2) moral agents, seeking to discern, do, and defend what we consider is the right thing. We are (3) householders and consumers, involved in a daily round of dwelling, eating, and entertaining. We are, necessarily, economic agents, engaging in the labour that makes dwelling possible. We are (5) cultural beings, who enjoy the fruits of human creativity in everything from staged performances and recorded music to the pictures we hang on our walls or the television we watch or the books we read. And we are (6) intimates, creators of love and emotional connection in our relationships with our friends and families Among the many roles of modern life, citizen [is] what we might call "Role Seven". (Mark Kingwell)

Human life cannot be merely breathing and bleeding and dying, although the life of each of us includes these things. Rather, the life we seek for ourselves, the life we promote for others, is existence exuberant. Life as simplicity, celebrated. Life as movement unbound. Life as knowledge embraced and embracing. Life as work and as song. Life as taking, and giving. Life as freedom - life as a dance. (Inter Pares)

¹ The word "meditation" is meant to signal that these ideas are very exploratory.

Introduction

I first published a workbook on non-profit boards² in 1998, an attempt to elucidate my 25 years of experience as a funder, manager, Executive Director, consultant, and teacher in the voluntary sector, and to make more easily accessible some of the thinking of the classic Board theorists such as Cyril Houle, John Carver, and David Leighton³. The materials grew topsy-turvy into a second edition late in 1999. By then, my sense of unease about traditional ways of thinking about Boards had grown to a noisy tumult.⁴

My unease about non-profit Boards, and that of many of my colleagues and clients, has become a flood of puzzling and thorny questions. The winds of change have created a voluntary sector where traditional frames of thinking about Boards no longer seem to work.

We have seen, for example:

- *a shift from concerns for justice and equity to the issues of effectiveness, efficiency, proven outcomes, and accountability⁵*
- *ever increasing growth and complexity within voluntary organizations*
- *a shift from informal cultures and voluntary action and service to professionalism, managerialism, protection against liability, and control*
- *increasing interests in networks, federations, and partnerships with porous boundaries, moving away slowly from more hierarchical and patriarchal structures*

² Creating Boards That Matter, 1999

³ Cyril Houle - Governing Boards, 1997; John Carver - Boards That Make A Difference, 1990; David Leighton and Donald Thain - Making Boards Work, 1997.

Putting these authors together may surprise some people as many have suggested that John Carver has created a new model of Boards. However, my own read of the situation is that Carver has not offered a new model, but rather much clearer language and processes for implementing traditional models.

⁴ I still keep copies lovingly around because of the wryfully humorous illustrations by my daughter, Caitlin.

⁵ I suspect that this ever present pressure to focus on services and products, or proven outcomes and evidence-based practices in today's new fads, reflects our deep assumptions of a consumer society where scarcity is assumed to be a fundamental reality.

- *a shift from voluntary organizations as separate, independent, community-based service deliverers, to broader, more homogeneous systems of service delivery, where power lies at the systems level.*⁶

This set of meditations is a renewed attempt to look at Boards quite differently. I am seeking a different story⁷ where citizens can become actively involved in Boards with passion and true heart. My imagination turns to my son, Ben, carving down a steep snow slope on a Board, subtly and supplely shifting weight and balance, always fluid. My own attempts at his art are more tentative; but, I want to suggest that we begin to talk about Boarding, not about Boards.

The ideas for this essay have been brewing for some time, part of a presentation to the November, 2001 conference of the Law Foundation of B.C., and a Valentine's Day supper conversation with my partner, Joan⁸, scribbling ideas for her Board madly all over the paper tablecloth. Too many organizations and Executive Directors are saying: *We have a Board, they make few key decisions, they add no real difference, and often, they meddle in staff business.* This is a waste of people's time, energy, heart, and Spirit.

Boarding, from my perspective, should be about:

- *instilling and renewing Spirit in both persons and organizations*
- *true-heartedness.*

Language And Metaphors

⁶ An earlier essay, The Voluntary Sector At A Crossroads, 1999, explored these shifts in more depth. Since this is meant to be a short, exploratory essay, the discussions will not be repeated here. Two key points need to be made. First, power has dramatically shifted within many voluntary organizations to external interests such as funders, regulators, and sector-wide decision-making and bargaining processes; and, internally, to Executive Directors and senior management teams. Second, traditional Board theories rest on hierarchical (more corporate) frames of thinking of organizations and power within organizations; and, these frames no longer fit our realities.

⁷ This essay, first drafted in Mexico while reading Mark Kingwell's The World We Want: Virtue, Vice, And The Good Citizen, 2000, flows from another short essay that I wrote in 1999 entitled, The Voluntary Sector At A Crossroads. I drafted it in Montreal, sitting in the Spring sun at my daughter's kitchen table. I argued there that the voluntary sector needs to create a new set of foundational stories if it is to remain vibrant, and uniquely different from the public and private sectors. Both essays are dedicated to Ben and to Caitlin, may they travel true-heart journeys wherever they are.

⁸ Joan is the Executive Director of CHIMO Crisis Services. That fact, our on-going conversations about her own Board and organization, and the deep context of giving life to the personal tragedy and sorrow of my daughter's death, have shaped much of my current thinking about Boards. John McKnight wrote once: *The surest indication of the experience of community is the explicit common knowledge of tragedy, death, and suffering. ... To be in community is to be a part of ritual lamentation, and celebration of our fallibility.*

Boards are social constructions. This is a truism, not a postmodern claim. But, the frames or metaphors we use to approach Boards, the language we adopt, shapes the questions we ask. Typically, we have asked: *Who is the Board?*, *What are their roles and responsibilities?*, *What value do they, or should they, add to the organization?*, *How do they reflect the interests of the membership?*, and *Why have a Board?* We see the Board as an object, a noun. I want to try and shift the language to: *What is Boarding?*, *How does it flow in myriad ways throughout the organization?*, *How does it interact synergistically with other organizational rivers of volunteering, serving, producing, innovating, risking, and leading?*, *How do citizens become involved in Boarding?*, and *Who are an organization's citizens?*

Three Lives

In the earlier essay, I began to explore the idea that each voluntary organization has three separate, but interlinked, lives.

- The *associational or community life*, where people come together freely, in dialogue, to explore what the mission of the organization means to them as persons and families, living in neighbourhoods and working in diverse settings. The *associational or community life* is about learning, risking personal change, and, potentially, neighbourhood and social action.
- The *product or service life* where attention is focused on doing things for the broader community, or groups of people within the community. The *product or service life* is about growth, outcomes, client or customer relationships, funding, standards, staff, and volunteers.
- The *innovation or renewal life*, where new thoughts, ideas, languages, and metaphors come into play, perhaps gestated or sparked by actions, crises, and conflicts within the two other lives; and, are given birth, defined, and brought to fruition. The *innovation or renewal life* encompasses planning in traditional forms, but also entrepreneurial thinking.

In personal language, we might think of the *associational or community life* as having to do with the Spirit and Soul of the organization, the *product or service life* as having to do with the Body and Heart of the organization, and the *innovation or renewal life* as having to do with the Mind of the organization. Whatever the words⁹, I am convinced that each voluntary organization, if it is to *survive, thrive, be sustainable*, and make a long term discernible difference in its community, needs to pay attention to the creative dynamics of all three separate lives.

My experience with many not-for-profit organizations is that they are dominated, driven, and shaped largely by their *product or service life*. While early on in their histories, the other lives, *community or associational* and *innovation or renewal*, played a part in people's initial passions and hopes, in time, these became buried in the hubris and detritus of the everyday realities of funding, staffing, managing, leading, planning, and being accountable.

The argument that I want to explore and develop in this essay is that Boarding, or Boards, should begin with the *associational or community life* of an organization. I want to suggest that we change our language from *I am a Board member* and *I am accountable to the members* to *I am a full and active citizen of this organization, engaged with heart and passion, with soul and spirit, in reflecting, dialoguing, learning, creating and re-creating stories, acting, and leading others as citizens of our organization*.

Boards are said to be the leaders of their organization¹⁰, though no one says much about what this means. *Leaders of what? For what? Why? With whom?* What I am suggesting is that Board members, first and foremost, should be leaders within the *associational or community life* of their organization. It is here that the Soul and Spirit of the organization are renewed and revitalized, kept fresh, alive, and creative. It is here that the grounding stories of the organization are born, and re-born, lived and re-lived. If leadership is about creating, narrating, and living, in exemplary ways, stories that have public meaning, then Boarding belongs, first and foremost in the *associational or community life*.

The Framing Problem

⁹ David Hurst's ([Crisis and Renewal](#)) ecological "figure of eight" metaphor of organizational change provides a different set of words for what I am trying to explore. Hurst talks about: the birth of an idea, the implementation life of the idea through initial growth and maturation, the death of an idea, and a period of crisis, confusion and re-visioning or re-languaging, before the cycle starts again. In my own painful journey, following Caitlin's death, I have deeply appreciated this metaphor of birth, life, death, and re-birth. It offers hope.

¹⁰ Robert Greenleaf ([Servant Leadership, 1977](#)) is unequivocal in calling trustees to lead their organizations to greatness.

I am often asked: *How many people should a Board have?* I am not at all sure what to say, but offer: 7 - 15, maybe 23. And, it depends. Seven is enough, just enough for a rich conversation, and it allows for a quorum to be met regularly at Board meetings even if a few are away or are sick, or ill at ease. 15 is getting to that point where the group is unmanageable among the rich and complex diversity of different and conflicting views and interests. Yet it is more reflective of the whole. And, 23. Only go there if you have a chairperson who is outstanding.

These may be interesting and useful answers. But, they flow out of a particular frame of what the Board is all about. They assume that the Board is a small, separate, group of people, who exist as a body to carry out certain purposes, who come together primarily in meetings. But, what happens if, as I am trying to do in this essay, we challenge this frame.

If the frame is based more on Boarding as citizenship and leading, then the answer may well be hundreds of people, no given number at any one time, a fluid group, which is really a loose network of smaller sub groups. And Board members may well be staff.

Traditional Board Frames

Over the decades, we have developed a number of frames for thinking about, imagining, and evaluating Boards: the new or entrepreneurial Board, the working or hands-on Board, the governance or policy Board, the Board in times of crisis or tragedy.¹¹ Most of the literature has focused on the governance or policy Board: how to create it, how to renew it.¹²

In the beginning days of a voluntary organization, there is no clear frame for the Board. Everyone does everything in the mad rush and passion to get started. People are glued together, they work together coherently, because of the new-ness and the simplicity of the vision, the excitement, not because of separate statements of the roles and responsibilities of Board members, staff, volunteers, and managers. Everyone is a prophet.

¹¹ There is another type, what I call the "friends of the founder" Board, that exists purely to provide a legal umbrella for what, essentially, is the founder's business.

¹² For example, Katherine Tyler Scott, Creating Caring And Capable Boards, 2000

Some organizations remain small and informal. Their Boards often resemble, or look like, volunteer coordinating committees. More typically, the organization grows and matures; and, the Board starts on the often rocky and thorny journey to becoming a governance or policy Board. Along the way, people go through various manifestations of the hands-on or working Board.

David Hurst's ecological loop gives one picture of this journey. Draw a solid line, an S-curve, going from the bottom, up to the right, and then starting to decline. This is the typical growth curve. Mark [1] at the bottom of this S-curve, [2] somewhat up the curve, [3] much further up the S-curve, and [4] at the top of the S-curve, or just as it begins to decline. Mark [5] at the point where this S-curve ends, usually a point of crisis.

Now draw a dotted line, a second S-curve, going from the first, through a trough, and then back upwards to the left, eventually joining the first S-curve at its beginning. This is the not so typical curve of renewal and transformation. Mark [6] all the way along the dotted curve.

Boards change through all of these stages.

- [1] *The new Board or what some have called the Entrepreneurial Board. In the words of my three lives, this is the Board that also focuses on the innovation or renewal life.*
- [2] *The hands-on or working Board, the in-between Board. Board members have let some work go to volunteers and staff, but other work, usually of a more managerial nature, they keep to themselves. It is partly an issue of lack of resources, and partly about trust and letting go.*
- [3] *The policy or governance Board that steps back, sets directions, and provides policies (values) to shape the work of the organization.*
- [4] *Some people have introduced another model here called a corporate Board that is more focused on efficiencies (share value).*
- [5] *The Board that is acting in crisis, either creating the crisis (for example: firing the Executive Director) or responding to the crisis. Most often, these Boards try to take their organizations back to the top of the loop. The wiser Boards see the crisis as a deep call for renewal.*
- [6] *The Boarding Board that focuses on building and re-building community, language, foundational stories, and a new vision.*

The Governance Board

Here is a traditional statement of governance Board roles and responsibilities; and a set of principles for being effective.

Boards:

- *Ensure that their organization remains legal, and acts legally*
- *Act and make decisions as a whole*
- *Raise tough questions and challenge each other and staff*
- *Develop core values and principles (policies) to shape and guide their organization*
- *Help to create future plans, and work to keep their organization alive, creative, and relevant*
- *Hold each other, and staff, accountable for actions and results*
- *Build community relations and advocate for their organization*
- *Help acquire the needed resources*
- *Remain passionate about the issues and communities of their organization*
- *Learn, dialogue, discuss, and act in the community.*
- *Encourage innovation, and pay attention to risk considerations*
- *Hire, evaluate, and fire their Executive Director.*

Boards should:

- *Have effective, competent, and independent leadership*
- *Build connections between the members and other key stakeholders of the organization and the Board*
- *Create a formal framework for the Board's roles and responsibilities, and benchmarks for the performance of Board members*
- *Ensure that Board members are competent to fulfill their roles and responsibilities through proper recruitment, orientation, training, and on-going provision of information*

- ❑ *Build a Board culture where participation, constructive dissent, and proactive dialogue is encouraged*
- ❑ *Ensure that the Board is appropriate in size, and has the necessary information to do its work.*

Within the context of the governance Board frame, these statements make some sense. However, this is where my puzzlement, my concerns, begin.

- ❑ *Does this governance frame make sense when so many voluntary organizations appear to be in deep crisis; and need renewal?*
- ❑ *Do we need Boards to carry out these kinds of roles, particularly if the organization is primarily focused on its product or service life?¹³*

Surfacing Buried Assumptions

¹³ For example, most voluntary organizations have extensive and complex processes for ensuring accountability, ranging from policies and procedures, hiring competent staff, providing professional development opportunities for staff, seeking professional advice from lawyers and accountants, internal checks and balances among staff, reporting to funders, evaluation processes, reporting to clients, accreditation processes, licensing procedures, and external financial audits.

There is also the too common reality that Boards do not carry out all of these roles and responsibilities well. Typically, Boards get caught up in issues of accountability and risk avoidance, in conflicts with their Executive Director and senior staff or within and among themselves, or in "meddling in operational issues". Or, Boards fall asleep, nodding awake only to put up their hands to make obligatory decisions. These are standard challenges. We have all seen them, too often. Workshops on Board roles and responsibilities, or legal expectations and liabilities, do little to change the situation; and, quite often, cause harm.

One approach, a residual approach, to looking at the traditional Board roles and responsibilities of planning, monitoring, policy-setting, building community relationships, and acquiring resources is to:

1. *Do an inventory of how the organization carries out each role; and, an assessment of how well it carries out this role.*
2. *Identify the areas for improvement, and the gaps.*
3. *Identify areas for Board action or involvement only where absolutely needed. In most situations, what will be required is a short term task force.*

But, Board members cry out: *We are responsible, We are ultimately responsible, We have fiduciary responsibility, and We may be liable.* How do we respond to these cries?

The challenge here, I believe, is that the cries are based on frames of understanding of voluntary organizations that no longer make any sense. They do not fit our changing realities and landscapes. Nor do they fit how voluntary organizations actually work. The cries are based on two connected assumptions: first, that the voluntary organization is, and should be, a triangular hierarchy; and, second, that the Board is, and should be, at the apex of that hierarchy.¹⁴

Related to both of these assumptions is a third, that Boards only relate to the Executive Director. And, underneath all three assumptions, is a deeper belief that organizations need to be coherent, and that coherency comes from "top-down" controls.¹⁵ Much of this arises from seeing an organization largely in terms of its *product or service life*, with some attention to the *innovation or renewal life*.

What happens if we challenge all of these assumptions and beliefs?

Let's imagine the voluntary organization as an intricate system of sub-systems, each connected to one or more of the three lives of the organization. Let's imagine that the Board is one of the sub-systems. And, then, rather than trying to control what happens, let's allow each sub-system to relate directly to any other, as long as it acts in ways that are positive or beneficial to its own life, and not harmful to the lives of others.

This suggests a picture of the organization as a complex community of diverse, connecting, and sometimes conflicting, persons and sub-communities. It is the reality of rich and abundant community life.

Another, closely related picture is that of the organization as a loose federation, glued together by deep founding stories and values, and shaped largely by the principle of subsidiarity.¹⁶ Another picture is of creative disorder, ambiguity, and paradox, And still

¹⁴ In legal terms, there is truth to these assumptions. However, legal incorporation, as important as it may be, does not breathe life into voluntary organizations. Too often, I have seen these legal matters cause frustration, disempowerment, and anger.

¹⁵ My reading of most of the research on organizational creativity, innovation, and synergy says that this belief, largely derived from patriarchal thinking, holds no water.

¹⁶ This principle says that authority properly belongs to those closest to the action.

another picture is of organizations as a series of flowing rivers, intersecting and connecting in multiple ways.

Do voluntary organizations need to be so coherent, like laser light, with everyone "on the same page", flowing with and toward a common mission, vision, and set of three year objectives? What would happen if we jettison over-arching organizational mission and vision statements and objectives; and, said, honestly and openly, to each part or sub-system: *You must work out your own coherency, enough but not too much. There is an organizational "cloak"; but, wear it lightly. Trust more in your own creativity, integrity, and enthusiasm. Respect the interests of others. And, be part of the on-going conversation of who we are, together, as a people.*

If we see an organization as a community, then the common life flows like a series of rivers, never quite the same or the same amount. We need a sense of order, a vessel in which we can interact together. What we do not need is control.¹⁷

Boards As Citizens

Citizenship is a way of meeting one of our deepest needs, the need to belong; it gives voice and structure to the yearning to be part of something larger than ourselves. By the same token, citizenship is a way of making concrete the ethical commitment of care and respect, of realizing in action an obligation to aid fellow travellers - in short, of fostering justice between persons. At its best, a best we have yet to realize, citizenship functions as a complex structure for realizing our deeply social nature, even as it acknowledges and copes with the terrible vulnerability of humans, the myriad frailties and risks of our existence on the mortal plane. (Mark Kingwell)

If we are to explore what it means for Boarding and Boards to be about citizenship, we need to be clearer about organizations as communities: diverse peoples, called and passionate, within a certain domain or field of endeavour, interest, and activity. For it is in the context of communities and nations that we have most lived out being citizens.

¹⁷ Much of the literature on organizational innovation and deep directional change (for example: Ralph Stacey's Complexity And Creativity In Organizations, 1996), suggests that what is new "bubbles up" from the bottom, or out of the interstices between the formal and the informal. Henry Mintzberg (Strategy Safari, 1998) talks of "emergent planning". Gordon Mackenzie talks of Orbiting The Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide To Surviving With Grace, 1996.

Organizations can be seen in many ways: structures, producers, full of competing interests, prisons, driven by strategic interests, owned, legal entities, in flux, flowing rivers, and behaving like organisms in ecological niches and environments.¹⁸ Each of these different frames or metaphors can help us understand our organizations, and act pragmatically.

And, each in turn, gives rise to a way of thinking about Boards. For example, the organization as legal entity gives rise to the notion of the Board as fiduciary trustee on behalf of the owners, or members. Or, the organization as organism in an ecological niche gives rise to the notion of the Board as strategic thinker, planner, and leader. Or, the organization as competing political interests gives rise to the notion of the Board as mediator.

Organizations can also be seen as communities of people, bound together by common passions and interests.

These associations of community represent unique social tools that are unlike the social tool represented by a managed institution. ... The structure of associations is the result of people acting through consent. ... The associations in community are interdependent. To weaken one is to weaken all. ... The community environment is constructed around the recognition of fallibility rather than the ideal. ... Community structures tend to proliferate until they create a place for everyone, no matter how fallible. They provide vehicles that give voice to diversity and assume that consensual contribution is the primary value. ... In the proliferation of community associations, there is room for many leaders and the development of leadership capacity among many. This democratic opportunity structure assumes that the best idea is the sum of the knowings of the collected fallible citizens who are citizens. ... The proliferation and development of community associations allow for the flowering of creative solutions. (John McKnight)

And now, let's start unraveling Boarding and Boards from the perspectives of community, and its implied rivers of Spirit, Belonging, Equity, Values, Diversity, and Justice.

¹⁸ See, for example, Gareth Morgan's [Images Of Organization 1986](#).

The first implication is that to be a Board member, to Board, is to participate openly and fully in the life of the community. As a contrast, being a Board member, or Boarding, is not about attending Board meetings. Board meetings are events or tools, just that, in the living life of a Board. Being part of a community takes time, both micro and macro. Busyness, a trait of many of us, will get in the way.

The second implication is that to be a Board member, to Board, is to be open to both being and becoming as a person. The life of open dialogue demands a letting go, a readiness to live in an Open Space, and a hunger for Soul and Spirit. The life of a Board member, then, is one of learning, listening, dialoguing, and changing, as a person within the community.

The third implication is that Board members are community leaders, both internally in the sense of the organization as community, and externally. Looking at the organization as a community, the organizational boundaries become open and porous. People elect to become part of, to live and act within the community. One could even argue that there are people who believe and act in certain ways who are part of the organizational community even though they are not aware of the organization. Board members as community leaders are politicians, in the best sense of that word. They engage with others in the "art of the possible". They create and hold a space for others to act¹⁹.

The fourth implication is that being a Board member, or Boarding, is about passion and animation. To animate is to breathe in the Wind of Spirit. In Old Testament imagery, Board members, like Moses, should experience the burning bush. Or, like Elijah, the powerful wind, the fire storm, and the still, small voice.

A Practical Story

In practical or real everyday terms, what might all of this actually look like? At this point, I am not sure. But here is a story meant to evoke some possibilities.

Catherine sat back in her chair, breakfast over, gazing at Ken and Eileen. All three would say, at least privately, that they were active Board members of CHIMO Crisis Services, though their understandings of what that meant would be widely diverse. And yet, they accepted this fact together with humour and delight. Jokingly, they called their breakfast meetings, Eggs Benedict Boarding sessions.

¹⁹ Harrison Owen's ([Riding The Tiger](#), 1991) principles and law are well worth remembering here: (1) Whoever comes is the right people, (2) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have, (3) Whenever it starts is the right time, and (4) When it is over, it is over, and (5) Everyone has two feet, and must be prepared to use them.

Ken lived in Richmond. Years before, he had chaired the Board. Now, he chaired the Committee on Risk Analysis, a group of experts, living and working in the community, who were prepared to come together, listen and analyse, and offer risk advice to any part of CHIMO's loose federation. Annually, they offered a global federation report on risk issues to the Summer Community Meeting. Their last report had challenged people to take more risks, not less.

Eileen was the manager of CHIMO's services to women in crisis, a valued member of the senior management team. She also held overall responsibility for labour/management issues. Catherine was an active member of the South Arm Neighbourhood Action Group, and a trainer in CHIMO's Neighbour Helping Neighbours In Crisis initiative. She had recently returned from Prince George where she had been facilitating a community group wanting to consider similar approaches.

But, none of these roles were part of their understanding of being Board members, of participating in the Boarding processes within the diverse CHIMO community.

*The three met monthly, always over breakfast, always on a Thursday. They shared a common reality of losing a child to illness, accident, or suicide. This morning they had been discussing a recent article in the Globe and Mail on the devastating gap between survivors of tragedy and their families, friends, and neighbours. Catherine had suggested e-mailing the article throughout the CHIMO Boarding network, a loose group of some 225 people. She wanted to offer to all of the different Boarding sub-groups an opportunity to explore in more depth the challenge of language, of *Give Sorrow Words*.²⁰ Ken and Eileen had agreed, spontaneously, to become part of this process if there was a rising response.*

Later, Eileen remembered to give Joan, the Executive Director, a call, to start the e-mailing process, and to keep her in the loop of what might happen.

Tough And Thorny Issues

If we are to move forward on the kinds of directions for Boards that I am suggesting, there are a number of tough and thorny issues that we need to address.

²⁰ A brilliant book by Tom Crider, in grief for his daughter.

(1) Power

Boards have power, or so they claim. Legally, they have the power to oversee, decide, control, and block. Hierarchically, they have power to direct. Yet, in practical terms, power tends to reside with those who participate in the organization daily, or over years, that is, management and staff.

In any organization, healthy or toxic, power is always widely distributed through the formal structures and informal cultures. Power can be used well and creatively. But, power can also end up in whirlpools of conflicts, and power can become malevolent. What use is it for Boards to say that they have power, when that power is never used to animate, to Breathe Spirit into, the organization, the community?

Power needs to flow freely through the informal and subterranean rivers of the organization. Leadership is about acting, unblocking the rivers, building bridges, and blowing up dams. In other words, Boarding, and giving leadership to Boarding, has its own understandings of power: the power of passioning, the power of empowering, and the power of connecting.

(2) Acting Backwards

Part of the difficulty we face in thinking about, or reflecting on, Boards and Boarding is that we ask the questions backwards. People come together with passions for an idea, issue, or new service; create an organization; decide to legally incorporate; and end up with a Board. That new group of people largely get on with the initial work, building the idea, the service, the organization. They do not think much about what it means to be a Board, or to Board. Not until later, when there is more time for reflection, do people stop and ask: *But, what is our role as a Board?*

Alternatively, we recruit new Board members; and, before asking them why they chose to join the Board or what Boarding might mean to them personally, we train them with mountainous Board manuals.

This is all backwards, driven by arcane legal structures, ancient thinking about accountability, and wrong-headed recruitment approaches. The deeper questions might be: *If you were creating this organization anew, would you give it a Board, and, if so, why?; If you were to invite someone to become part of your organization, your community, would you want them to be a Board member, and, if so, why?; and, What might Boarding look like in your organization?*

(3) *The Mysteries Of Accountability*

We cloak Boards in the mysteries, the terrors, of accountability and liability. No wonder they clam up, go inwards, demand risk management policies, seek legal advice. These drain passion, life out of a Board, and the community.

At least this thorny difficulty can, I think, be resolved simply. Here are some basic rules of thumb for ensuring accountability well, without becoming trapped.

1. *Hire competent staff whose experience and professional training will demand that they act with full ethical consideration, due diligence, and responsibility.*
2. *Create a few simple ethical policies; what John Carver has called: Thou shalt not ...*
3. *Build in financial contingencies. Mistakes will happen. In fact, if they don't, the organization is not risking enough in its future, in its community.*
4. *Use external auditors, but not just for finances.*
5. *Create an Audit working group, a group of people whose passion is systems building and monitoring. Let them review the finances, and monitor the implementation of policies.*
6. *Create a Risk Analysis or Safe Practices working group to provide sound advice on the risks inherent in major decisions, and to teach people how to balance risk-taking with risk-avoidance in their daily lives in the organization, the community.*

All of this is quite easy to do. But don't trap the Board, or the Boarding rivers, in this. Leadership and community demands risk-taking, not risk-avoidance.

(4) *Long-Term Thinking*

Some, many, have suggested that the role of the Board, of Boarding, is to set the future of the organization (visions, goals, directions, and plans) which others, staff and volunteers, carry out. They suggest that the Board ought to be thinking 3 - 5 years out. In reality, in

most community groups or voluntary organizations, no one, or only the Executive Director, is thinking that far out.²¹

If innovation, new directions, and change in an organization, a community, flow or "bubble up", and depend more on the diffusion of ideas and creativity, then we need to create "pathways" of all different shapes and sizes where ideas, information, and innovation can flow, and be nurtured. One possibility is to create a Foresight working group whose sole task for the organization, the community, is to play at "scanning" the winds of change, and keeping everyone informed.

Public And Private Spaces

I think that I am arguing here for bringing the private lives of persons and families in community, the private lives of emotions, Soul, and Spirit, into the more public life of organizations. Voluntary organizations are a golden opportunity to experiment with new approaches to mixing the rational and the irrational, the mind and the heart, the Soul and the body. This is what citizenship is all about, bringing to the public sphere, the public conversation, all of whom we are and want as persons, in communities. Voluntary organizations may be a gentler place than the broader, colder nation or provincial states, for engendering citizenship.

The argument of this essay is that Boarding, or Boards, ought to be about leading and engendering citizenship within the community of this particular organization.

²¹ There is also considerable questioning in the literature as to whether long term strategic planning actually creates benefits for an organization.