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2000 UPDATE

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TOWARDS AN UNRULY VOLUNTARY SECTOR

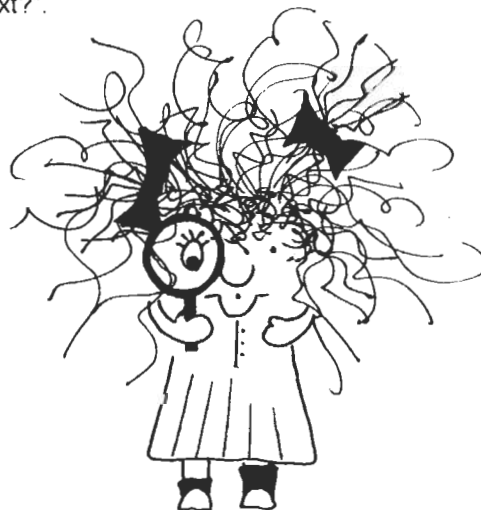
*Britain's voluntary sector has become severely dependent on state funding, which could cramp its style. ... maybe by its nature the voluntary sector is turned inwards, untidy and unfocused. The risk in governments taking too lively interest isn't the seductions of public money but the risk of applying political and administrative discipline to diffuse and diverse volunteers who have to be **unruly and unruled**.*

(David Walker, The Manchester Guardian, September 30 - October 6, 1999).

I came across this article right after I had published my own essay: **The Voluntary Sector At A Crossroads** (see back page for ordering details). The parallels with what is happening in Canada are fascinating, particularly the emphasis on reporting, accountability and outcomes.

My essay is an attempt to explore the past fifteen years of the community services sub-sector in British Columbia, and particularly its changing relations with government. I argue that we need new languages and metaphors if we are to build a vibrant voluntary sector for the 21st century.

Beyond suggesting a pragmatic philosophy whereby each organization needs to find and determine its own understandings of words such as "non profit", "community-based", and "voluntary"; and musing about a different way of imagining the roles of Boards (see page 5); I tried to avoid being prescriptive about the future. Several people who have read the essay, however, have raised the question: "What do you see next?".



**Unruliness May Give Us A
Telescope For Peering, Like Alice,
Through The Looking Glass.**

On The Edge

(Benjamin Perryman, 1995)

The air is thin up here, and my lungs are still struggling for the oxygen that isn't around to be consumed. My legs are sort of wobbling, half in anticipation, and half in fear of the task ahead. I strap my feet into my bindings. My heart is beating faster now, knowing that a mistake will mean injury, possibly even death. I look out, over and down the cornice. It looked about thirty feet from below, and now seems to be as high as one of the skyscrapers downtown. My brain sends out one last message of sanity, warning me of my actions. But, its message is in vain, an emotion deep down inside of me has taken over my brain. I am both fixed, motionless in my stance, and compelled to proceed further, by the same emotion. Finally, the force overpowers the restriction, and I shoot off the cornice, pushed and guided by fear.

Fear is an emotion that drives people to test their limits; and, at the same time, incapacitates others from even trying. Overcoming fear does not mean that you are too stupid to realize the consequences. Rather, overcoming fear is proof that we can channel this emotion to push us, instead of allowing it to hold us back. Without fear, we lose the emotion that can drive us to test our personal limits, in a way that no other feeling can.

We all have imaginary lines that we set for ourselves as limits to what we are able to accomplish. My lines are set in the sport of snow boarding [and rock climbing]. There are things I am able to do, and others that I know I am not able to do. Surpassing these lines, and pushing them further, appears to be a dream that we all share. There are many runs that I wish I was able to board, [and pitches that I was able to climb]. Sometimes it is impossible for us to make these dreams reality. But, usually it is harder to even try; and, fear is what stops us from trying.

On The Line

(Caitlin Perryman, 1999)

I am perfectly still except for my hands which, almost of their own accord, search the air above my head for balance. My body is calm, but my mind races. As much as I try and control it, there is a fear that sends sparks through my body, shaking my knees and ankles. I am fighting. It is a simple jump. I know what to do: push, stretch, tuck your knees up, shoot them back out, land, and absorb the shock. I have taken this jump a hundred times with confidence, but today I am terrified. I have a choice. I push the rampant images of a missed footing out of my head, and the fear transforms, becoming a concentrated stream of energy that electrifies my body from head to toe. I jump!

This is a story about risk. Or maybe it is a story about passion. In some ways they go hand in hand. By chosen (and the word is important) profession, I am a tightrope walker. I quite literally "walk the fine line". There is one simple rule in tightrope walking: **Don't Fall Off!** However, the daily challenge that lies underneath this rule is more complex, and perhaps more important.

The challenge is not simply to cross from one platform to the other, but to do so with grace and elegance - to move as if dancing on water. Easier said than done. Before stepping out onto the wire, there is fear, the eternal "What if?". Once safe on the other platform, there is elation and triumph. In the middle, runs the cable of risk, a place of freedom which can only be found in the middle of two extremes. In this place, the order of risk overtakes any other. Falling is simply not an option. As an acrobat, I must always outdo myself - jump higher, dance faster. In this space, risk is beautiful. It is the rule of "anything is possible!"

This is my everyday story of risk. This is also my story of passion. Or, maybe this is a story of my passion for risk. My place is on a cable between two platforms. It is a fragile place.

I resonate to the word, "unruly". It connotes images of creativity, advocacy, warmth, community, passion, irony, and foolishness. It suggests rude and tough questioning. It bridges youth and older age. It is about character. And, much of what I do as a consultant is to provide "space" for people to become more unruly, in their thinking, imagining, questioning, planning, and being together.

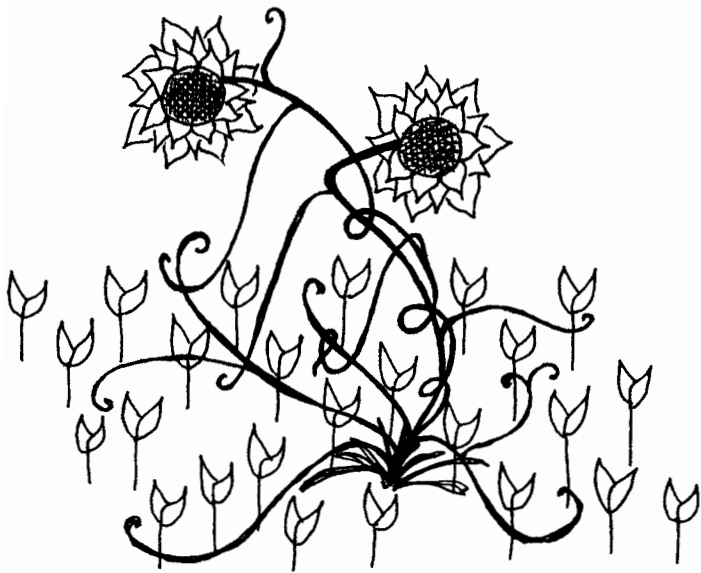
The Webster's Dictionary offers a variety of rich connections.

Unruly: disposed to resist rule or discipline, intractable, ungovernable, restive, ...

Restive: impatient of control, restless, fidgety, stubborn, balky,

Intractable: refractory, obstinate, perverse, rebellious, ...

Refractory: not amenable to control, disobedient, turbulent, ...



**Risk Is An Inevitable
Characteristic Of Any Unruly Or
Adaptive Organization**

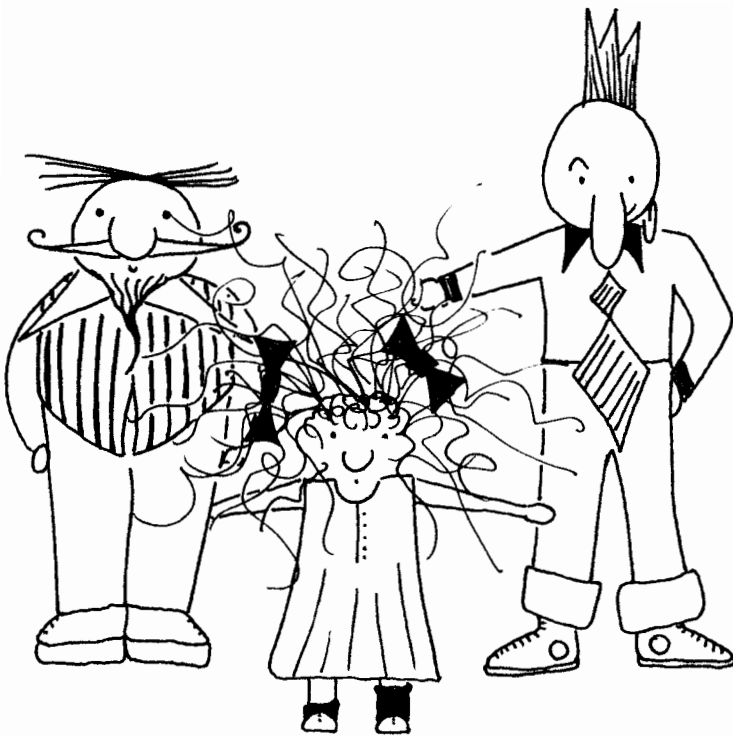
These words are different from our traditional, and to my mind now largely irrelevant, stories of being non profit, grassroots, community-based, and voluntary - though there are interesting connections. They paint pictures opposite to what has emerged in large chunks of the voluntary sector over the past 15 years, as we have concentrated on building safe, quality, rationalized, efficient, unionized, and government funded services and service delivery systems. They intimate alternative images to those that are suggested in some of the recent reports on the voluntary sector (for example: **Building On Strength - Improving Governance And Accountability In Canada's Voluntary Sector** or **Working Together - A Government Of Canada / Voluntary Sector Joint Initiative**).

My first question is whether words like "unruly" contain fertile seeds for a new way of viewing the critical differences among public and quasi-public institutions, private businesses and corporations, and voluntary sector organizations and community groups? My second question, related to the first, is whether we need unruly organizations to help local communities learn, adapt, and walk well through the turbulent winds of change? To both questions, I believe that the answer ought to be "yes".

Unruliness Is Closely Linked To Passion

In my own experience, unruliness is not possible without an open commitment to risk taking and passion, both personally and organizationally. Hence the two earlier stories from Caitlin and Ben.

I encounter many voluntary organizations that, day in and day out, continue on, delivering solid services. They do "okay", even well, but are buffeted by the winds of change, and are deeply vulnerable to major shifts in government funding relations. They are "hanging in" and "hanging on", but not "hanging out". Their Boards wonder what they are supposed to be about. Risk is avoided, often because of the expectations or demands of funders, regulators, professional associations, local media, and unions. Passion is limited.



I see other organizations that have a lurking sense, sometimes clear and sometimes murky, that their "present" is not their "future". There is passion for a bigger picture, for community influence, and for growth. There is a readiness to risk and seek change - both personally and organizationally. Typically, these organizations are messy, chaotic, and ambiguous - in other words, unruly. Their Boards do not worry too much about "governing the present", but focus their energies and spirits on fathoming and playing with the future - on "hanging out".

Finally, I come up against some organizations where fear, the other side of the coin called risk, has taken over, creating a toxic work environment and severely limiting people's capacity to do good work together. Here, often as a result of buried emotional reactions to a critical incident, there is no longer any tolerance of mistakes. The wagons of protection, and presumed safety, have been circled around the organization. Risk is forbidden. Passion has long gone. Boards are gatekeepers of the past. These organizations are neither "hanging in", nor "hanging on", nor "hanging out".

This last group of organizations are deeply troublesome. They hurt people. The first group are important, inasmuch as they deliver services that communities need, and do so well. But, the fact that they may be incorporated as non profit societies is largely irrelevant. From the perspective of the future of the voluntary sector, it is the third group that intrigues me. They are the ones walking an unruly path.

Some Characteristics Of An Unruly Organization

- Living through principles; rather than being governed by rules
- Creating meaningful and changing work experiences; rather than living by job descriptions
- Seeing planning as on-going learning and acting; rather than building five year plans
- Expecting some parts of the organization to be stable, mature, and safe; while others are younger and chaotic; and still others are aging and dying; rather than seeking consistency throughout
- Seeing organizational structures as fluid and ambiguous lines; rather than tightly drawn and linked boxes
- Expecting organizational boundaries to be porous and open; rather than tightly drawn to keep out the environment
- Ensuring that action and experimentation takes precedence; rather than focusing on meetings, planning, and reports
- Letting go of fear; rather than letting fear clog up the organization's arteries
- Focusing on good judgement; rather than building complex measureable indicators
- Worrying about why and what; rather than how, where, and when