

## **Audacity**

(presented to the Canadian Caregivers Coalition, Ottawa,  
June 19, 2008)

*Dedicated to Katharine Pearson, a dear friend and colleague who passed away on May 24th and who was instrumental in creating the Canadian Caregivers Coalition.*

I don't normally like to name drop but Sean Moore said I should so I will.

How many of you have heard of the Gamaliel Foundation?

How about its successor, the ABCD Institute?

John McKnight?

Barack Obama?

I'm glad to see a small flicker of recognition!

Barack Obama was a community organizer in Chicago for 5 years as part of the Gamaliel Foundation. John McKnight who co-founded both Gamaliel and the ABCD Institute is his mentor and friend.

And John is mine – I've been a faculty member of the ABCD Institute at Northwestern since its founding in 1995. And any friend of John's is a friend of mine!

During dinner a few weeks ago John told me of his first encounter with Barack. He and his colleagues had placed ads in the LA Times; NY Times and Chicago Sun Tribune. A small but tempting ad asking 'Do you want to Change the World?'

They wanted to begin a training school for community organizers.

Obama and 80 others answered. 20 were chosen. He was one of them.

And he so impressed John both as a person and as a community organizer that John who was in his 40's decided to make Barack who was in his early 20's his friend. They became close personally and professionally. Eventually Michelle Obama, herself a brilliant community activist, became a faculty member of the ABCD Institute as well.

One day Obama came to him and asked John not to tell anyone just yet but he had decided to apply to Law school. I've decided to go into public life and in the US the usual price of admission is a law degree.

No other faculty knows me as well as you do. Would you write me a letter of reference?

John of course said sure. Which law schools should I send it to?

Harvard.

Harvard?

Yes.

Where else?

That's it, just Harvard.

Ah Barack, says John, don't you think you should have a backup plan? Why not the University of Chicago Law School just in case?

No thanks, if I don't get into Harvard, I'll do something else!

He was audacious and bold even then.

The rest is well known – he did get into Harvard and he did become editor of the Harvard Law Review (which to my surprise is run by students) – the most prestigious legal journal perhaps in the world and which propels you on to greater things ... like running your own law firm or your own country!

Along the way he wrote a couple of books, the most recent of which is the Audacity of Hope. The concept of hope is one manifestation of his community organizing days and of John's influence. He chose the virtue of hope because that's the bedrock Americans need to rebuild their society, to believe they are capable of solving their own problems. And it is the bedrock of all great change-makers.

During subsequent conversations with John they also discussed the importance of audacity.

Obama had decided that the changes he wanted would happen faster if he became a politician. He felt he had skills that could be better utilized. His groove had become a rut. It wasn't good enough to transmit good ideas to systems – someone had to be there to receive them.

John says Obama has a need to make deeper more lasting change.

Change-making that tilts a system – that transforms it – that spreads the benefits. Change that has impact, scale and durability.

In that regard change is by definition audacious. It is bold. And those who are good at it, as you know, have to know when to step outside their comfort zone. To think and act differently

Our work with people with disabilities and their families at led Vickie and I to the same conclusion. We too were inspired by John McKnight who wrote:

*The crisis we have created in the lives of excluded people is that they are disassociated from their fellow citizens... We seek nothing less than a life surrounded by the richness and diversity of community. A collective life. A common life. An everyday life. A powerful life that gains its joy from the creativity and connectedness that comes when we join in association to create an inclusive world.*

Nevertheless it took us a while to understand what he meant and even longer to put it into practice.

We created PLAN to answer the question, ‘What happens to our disabled children when we die?’

We no longer had faith that services would provide the answer.

We decided our relatives with disabilities faced 2 fundamental handicaps which overshadowed their assessments, labels, and functional disability.

One, they are lonely - isolated in what is often an impersonal service delivery system.

Two they are poor. Despite the millions spent on services to our sons and daughters, they receive no direct financial benefit.

So we chose a different path - one that stepped aside from mainstream disability thinking, particularly mainstream disability organizations and their funders.

We decided to ask a different question: What's a good life?

We decided to become financial self sufficient: We became a social enterprise.

We learned to operate in a different paradigm: We focus on the role of our sons and daughters as contributing citizens.

But we too faced a crisis of confidence. The change we wanted wasn't happening fast enough. No matter how many personal networks we developed; how many special needs trusts we assisted; how many organizational replications we created, we weren't having much impact. Even working our hardest we calculated by the time we retired we might affect mere thousands; when hundreds of thousands were experiencing poverty and loneliness. Something had to change.

We were obliged to become bold. That led to our proposal and campaign to create the world's first Disability Savings Plan.

As you know it received final government Royal Assent last December (2007) and will be a product for sale by 14 Financial Institutions on December 1<sup>st</sup> this year. Canada is the first country to recognize a global demographic tsunami – the first generation of people with disabilities to outlive their parents.

The Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP) immediately benefits 400,000 Canadians with disabilities

putting real money in their hands not more services. Another 350,000 are eligible and will no doubt apply in order to take advantage of the matching grants and bonds from the Federal Government. Billions of dollars have been released to enable our family members to accumulate their own financial assets and enjoy a good life.

As if that change wasn't enough to our great surprise the RDSP has produced a cascade of others.

Disability welfare systems in Canada are imploding. Provincial governments are changing eligibility for government support to exempt the financial assets of our sons and daughters and eliminate claw-back of the disbursements from their disability savings plan. This precedent is already attracting the attention of anti poverty activists!

We've done some calculating and the potential market size of the RDSP is \$80 Billion. Previously we had concluded the accumulated special needs trust market in Canada is another \$80 Billion. If we mobilized even a fraction of that \$160 Billion we would have an economic power base.

Who says we're poor!

We are now exploring how to use the collective RDSP and trust assets of our sons and daughters to create a No One Alone Fund and a Pooled Investment Fund to eliminate isolation, nurture belonging and foster contribution.

Our campaign to inspire the federal government to create the Registered Disability Savings Plan follows the path of other successful social innovators we have met or studied. Thanks to Tim and Stephen of the McConnell Foundation, Katharine, Vickie and I had the honour of studying successful social innovation for 2 years. Not the early stage social innovations and inventions which remain as pilots but the transformational stage that has survived and spreads the change to benefit everyone affected by the issue.

We've discerned or observed 6 deep patterns which I will review tomorrow. But there is one pattern I'd like to mention tonight. We call this pattern, The WHO IS IMPORTANT AS the HOW. Sounds like Dr. Seuss doesn't it?

What John saw in Obama and what Katharine Vickie and I saw in the people we observed was their:

- Audacity to be bold –think Sister Marguerite d'Youville – perhaps Canada's greatest and most innovative caregiver, and certainly our first, coming to Montreal in the 1600's to tend to the social and health needs of a burgeoning settlement
- Audacity to be passionate – think Maria Montessori
- Audacity to persist – think Florence Nightingale
- Audacity to tell your story - to make the truth visible and by doing so validate the experiences of thousands.

Think Marion Thomson, the founder of La Leche League

- Audacity to be courageous – think of the women who founded the Women’s Institute in Canada in the late 1800’s, a social innovation that inspired women’s groups around the world
- Audacity to be spiritual – think Dame Cicely Saunders the founder of the hospice movement beginning in London in the 1940’s
- Audacity to see abundance not scarcity - to assume we have enough resources and people to solve our own problems - to mobilize the reservoir of our social and economic assets – to become self sufficient. Think Wangari Maathai – the woman who planted trees - who won the Nobel Prize for founding the Pan African Green Belt Network.  
Obama wrote about this in 1990 while still a student at Harvard:

*Finally community organizations and organizers are hampered by their own dogmas about the style and substance of organizing. Most still practice what Professor John McKnight of Northwestern University calls a "consumer advocacy" approach, with a focus on wresting services and resources from the outside powers that be. Few are thinking of harnessing the internal productive capacities, both in terms of money and people, that already exist in communities.*

- Audacity to stand up for the power of relationships – to speak out against policies that bust relationships rather than strengthen them. Isn't this essentially the work of the family care-giving coalition? Think Katharine Pearson.

I have a feeling our beloved Katharine was so committed to your and our work because she deeply understood that without relationships we are nothing.

My question to you is: What kind of change- making does the Canadian Caregiver Coalition want to produce?

The kind that pokes along, that hopes someone picks up our good ideas – that produces some pilot projects – does some good?

Or the kind that is intentional, strategic and consciously bold, like the caregiver innovators I have described above. The kind that gets your innovation into the Canadian water supply

The kind that leads you to the White House or Parliament Hill or Queens Park or the chamber where Joseph Howe rose to fame

The kind that calls on all your leadership abilities

You see Obama knows something we must never underestimate. If you speak the truth you are unstoppable. If you step out you will galvanize a country. Regardless of your name, gender, skin color or topic

If you step up you put a powerful face to a universal expression – to a slumbering giant – to the millions of

Canadians struggling with their family care-giving responsibilities.

The moment is here. Are we prepared to meet it?  
If you need a reference for that kind of transformation I know a certain professor in Chicago who has had pretty good luck with his letters.

Heck, I know a Foundation here in Canada that lives and breathes John McKnight's insights and has come to this gathering prepared to support us make massive change.

Better yet let's do it ourselves – let's make tomorrow the date when a group of BODACIOUS innovators made family care-giving a government priority and showed the world Canadians do know how to take care of each other.

Who, on June 20<sup>th</sup> 2008 said, dare I say it, YES WE CAN!

Al Etmanski, June 2008