

Opening Remarks by Eric Young
Toronto City Summit Alliance
February 26, 2007

© Eric Young, 2007

It's a great privilege to have been asked to speak to you this morning.

I haven't been involved in the City Summit Alliance, but, as a citizen of Toronto, have admired its intentions and initiatives with appreciation from the sidelines. Diverse groups of people stepping forward and stepping up — to make change happen in this place whose future we all care about. Finding ways to go beyond the demands and constraints of formal positions and day jobs...finding ways to engage across the borders and barriers of institutional silos...finding common purpose and common cause...This is the real seedbed for civic action and social change. My hat goes off to you.

And this is precisely what I want to talk about today – what David Pecaut and the forum organizers asked me to talk about. Change. Big change. How change happens. Making big change happen.

Before I begin, I should locate myself in relation to this theme. I run a company called E.Y.E. I suppose the simplest way to describe the company is that we are a *social projects studio™*. Working with civil society, government and corporate clients, we develop initiatives whose purpose is to promote positive social change. These are usually fairly ambitious and long-term initiatives. For the most part, they require high levels of citizen engagement. And, over the years, we've had the opportunity to address some pretty compelling social challenges in fields ranging from health to the environment to the strengthening of community to meeting the needs of those who are marginalized.

I've been working on and thinking about social change for a long time. But while my thinking has evolved over the years, I can't lay claim to any definitive answers. The more I work in this domain, the more I've come to recognize that real change is not an ordered, mechanical, linear or very predictable process. Given my business, I wish that weren't so. It would be way more satisfying to have the killer app for change...be smart...develop a strategy...push a button and presto!...success. No such luck. Twenty-five years in the game has taught me simply this: Big change is strange change.

My first foray into this field was back in the formative days of PARTICIPaction. I was pursuing a career as a filmmaker then, but while biding my time waiting to be discovered, I took on some writing assignments for the organization – a promotional film, then some advertising...It led to a long-term creative and strategic consulting role with the organization. In one of my very first meetings at PARTICIPaction, the then-president said to me, "You know, if we can save just one life with this campaign, the whole thing will be worth it." It was a nice sentiment. But I was young and tried to make a flippant joke by responding, "Well, if that's the case, why don't we decide whose life it is we want to save and instead of doing a public campaign, we could just concentrate all our efforts there." I was trying to be ironic. Little did I know that that remark would frame the fundamental question I've been hammering away at for the rest of my professional career: How do you have large-scale social impact?

But that was the point. PARTICIPaction didn't exist just to save one life. We were trying to make big things happen. Big change. Get massive numbers of people off their duffs and onto the streets all across Canada. We were trying to start the fitness revolution. And PARTICIPaction itself was a small operation. A handful of people in an office...a limited amount of money...no clear plan or pathway for the work of social transformation...just a big dream and absolute certainty that it was worth pursuing.

And I'd have to say that these starting conditions have characterized all my work since. Limited resources. Limited power. Audacious ambitions for a better future. A small handful of dedicated people willing to take it on. And a host of skeptics proclaiming it can't be done.

To be honest, working like this – on so many different initiatives addressing so many pressing societal challenges – has left me feeling neither frustrated nor daunted. I've been tilting at social windmills for a quarter of a century. And I've seen them move – sometimes a little, sometimes a lot.

I still start all my projects with a sense of possibility. And a sense of hope.

Hope is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism resides in the head. Hope resides in the heart. Optimism is an expectation, based on the evidence at hand, that there is a reasonable likelihood of a positive outcome. Hope "is the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it might turn out." This distinction between hope and optimism is not mine. It comes from Vaclav Havel, who, as you know, was a tireless opponent of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia and became the first President of the newly democratic state when that regime fell. But he didn't write these words as a victorious reflection. He wrote them from prison, a grim solitary confinement, when there was no reason to be optimistic about his own future, or that of his country. Hope is not an idle feeling. It is a powerful force. It fuels the courage for change. And when we think of some of the great change-makers of recent history, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, even Churchill in the war years, it seems that sometimes they single-handedly kept the spark of hope alive, the belief in the possibility of a better future, despite the dismal and desperate realities they confronted, until that spark could give courage to others.

My point is that to give up hope is not just to deny the possibilities of the future. It is also to deny the lessons of the past. The world can change. And does change. And what seemed almost impossible looking forward can seem almost inevitable looking back.

Let me tell you a story.

It is set in a place called the Kitlope River – which is located up on the BC coast, not far from the border with Alaska. It is a place of wild and extraordinary beauty, remote and accessible only by water. The Kitlope and the lands that surround it constitute the largest intact coastal temperate rainforest on the planet. This is the ancestral and spiritual homeland of the Haisla people.

The story involves a man I've come to call my friend. His name is Cecil Paul. He is 75 years old and Chief of the Whale Clan. He was born on the Kitlope when there were only a handful of families still living there. The rest had been wiped out by epidemics of flu and smallpox, or had relocated to the

village of Kitimat. When he was a young boy, Cecil was plucked from the Kitlope by the residential school program. As if being taken from his family, his culture and the only world he knew wasn't cruel enough, he was also subjected to prolonged and terrible abuse (all under the guise of that strategy whose proclaimed purpose was to "Canadianize the savages".) Broken by this experience, Cecil eventually made his way to Vancouver where, for the next thirty years, he became a drunk, living on the streets. The kind of person we see – with shaming regularity – in cities across Canada. It is not just their shame. But ours. We may turn a blind eye. We may feel pity. We may even feel a desire to help. But what we don't do is to imagine the potential for power there. The power to transform their own lives, let alone the lives of their communities. But that's exactly what Cecil did.

At some point – and with considerable difficulty – he made his way from the streets of Vancouver back up to the Kitlope. He said he felt a calling (from his ancestors) that broke through the alcoholic haze. There were no people living on the Kitlope now. Cecil sat there alone for days – maybe weeks. And finally resolved to give up alcohol to assume his role and responsibilities in the community. But, understandably, the community was pretty dysfunctional, many of its members suffering from a legacy similar to Cecil's.

In 1990, Cecil discovered surveyors' markings, indicating that a logging road was about to be cut into the territory. The logging company held the license for this part of BC, and they were operating within their rights. But this was a nightmare come true. Even though logging would mean jobs and money for the community, Cecil realized that it would do irreparable ecological harm and destroy the spiritual foundation of the Haisla.

The story of what happened over the next four years is long and complex and involves many players. There isn't the time to relate it here. But this is key:

At first there was just Cecil.

As he describes it, “I was alone in a canoe. But it was a magical canoe. It was a magical canoe because there was room for everyone who wanted to come into it, to paddle together. The currents against us were very strong. But I believed we could reach our destination. And that we had to for our survival.”

Not everyone agreed. The community was divided. The appeal of jobs and money was strong. For many, the chance to address immediate and pressing needs took precedence over the vaguer argument for existential needs. Short-term interests seemed more compelling than long-term dreams. But even where there wasn't disagreement, there was a pervasive sense of defeatism. A sense that the community had no capacity – and no authority – to stand up to more powerful forces. To change the inevitable.

But Cecil held to his ambitious dream. He won over the elected chief who joined him in his canoe. Then another member of the community. Then another. Though there were still divisions, more and more people began to align. To paddle together – with as Cecil says, “new hope in their hearts, as though they were waking from a long slumber”. Eventually they attracted the attention – and then the support – of an environmental organization called Ecotrust. They got to Mike Harcourt, who was premier of BC at the time. There was no simple political solution to saving the Kitlope, but he joined the canoe. Then, astonishingly, so did a man named Hank Ketchum. He was the CEO of the logging company. Swayed by an understanding of his company's potential impact on the future of the place and the people, he announced that the company would voluntarily relinquish their logging rights to the territory (which comprised almost 800 000 acres) without condition and without compensation.

In 1994, the territory was designated the Kitlope Heritage Conservancy, assuring protection in perpetuity for the largest coastal temperate rainforest remaining on earth.

Saving the Kitlope was a big thing. A big, improbable victory for the place the Haisla call home, and for the future.

I had the opportunity to visit the Kitlope once in the presence of Cecil and was waxing on with great enthusiasm about what had been accomplished there. Cecil looked at me with this wise, patient smile of his – he possesses the greatest moral authority of just about anyone I've ever met – and said, "You know, you guys call it 'the Kitlope'. But in our language we call it 'Huchsduwachsdu Nuyem Jeess'. That means 'land of the milky blue waters and the sacred stories contained in this place'. You think it's a victory because we saved the land. But what we really saved is our heritage – our stories which are embedded in this place and couldn't survive without it and contain all our wisdom for living."

Think about that for a minute. Think about it in reference not to the Kitlope but to Toronto and what you'll be discussing over the next two days. Think about how it echoes Jane Jacob's view of cities as containers of memory and storehouses of collective knowledge. Places are not just physical. They are relational. And the relationship between place and identity is profoundly important. Meaning-making and future-making go hand-in-hand.

Now let me return to Cecil's magic canoe for a moment because I believe it is such a powerful and apt metaphor for the process by which real social transformation and future-making happens. Though Cecil was designated a hero of the planet by an American environmental group, he would not call himself the hero of this story. Nor would I. (Though he is proof positive that positional power is not a pre-requisite for making big things happen.) Cecil is not the hero of the story. The magic canoe is.

It is heroic because of what it can accomplish.

A vessel that can accommodate everyone who wants to come on board. (Like this gathering here.) That somehow becomes an attractor that draws people in. That aligns energy and thereby gains power. So that it can be paddled successfully against the current. Think about that word, "current". And its two meanings: one refers to flow of energy in a particular direction. The other refers to the present, the existing, the prevailing, the here and now.

That is our sense of the present. That it has something inevitable about it. That current realities define future possibilities.

That's certainly what the World Bank thought when they conducted an analysis and made projections about the AIDS epidemic in Brazil. At the beginning of the 1990s, Brazil vied with South Africa for the dubious distinction of AIDS capital of the world. In fact, back then, Brazil had twice as many cases as South Africa. Based on the evidence – not only of the infection rates, but also the lack of a sophisticated health care infrastructure, the absence of necessary resources to fight the disease, and widespread illiteracy and poverty throughout the population – the World Bank study made dire predictions that Brazil would have off-the-charts prevalence of AIDS by the start of the Millennium. But today, while the infection rate in South Africa is 25% - one in four members of the population – in Brazil, it is 0.6% – one in 160. In a few short years, Brazil turned the tables on what seemed an inevitable and intractable problem and is now held up as a model for developing countries fighting AIDS.

It's a remarkable story that seems like a miracle on the surface. In reality it is anything but. It is not the case of divine intervention but of human intervention. Of defiance of the inevitable; bold, pattern-shifting problem solving; top-down and bottom-up leadership; engagement of all sectors of the society; and sheer stubborn muddling through... all fuelled by a powerful moral vision that it is unacceptable to write off so many fellow human beings.

Brazil was unwilling to accept the conclusions of the World Bank, or its view of the path forward. The country found the will to act – and then ways to act, by harnessing an extensive network of resources distributed throughout Brazilian society – NGOs, community groups, churches, schools and so on. They understood the complex interweaving of their society and drew the whole system into the cause to mobilize on the ground. At the macro level, they fought – and eventually won – some tough battles like bucking the World Trade Organization so they could produce generic anti-retroviral drugs domestically and distribute them for free.

Through a combination of efforts at all levels, aligned to an unyielding commitment to high purpose, they made a big thing happen. They saved millions of lives.

This example of Brazil's relative success in the battle against AIDS is just one of the social phenomena that some colleagues and I examined at a think tank on social innovation. The think tank was an initiative I helped to set up in 2002 as a partnership between McGill University and DuPont Canada to try to develop some insights into how breakthrough social change happens. We wanted to look at social change through the lens of complex systems (bringing to bear much of the new science of complexity). The shorthand for my brief for the think tank was: How can we view complexity as an opportunity rather than an obstacle in the pursuit of change?

All of the tough and seemingly intractable social challenges we face in today's world are, by nature, complex. Now let me be perfectly clear about this. When I say "complex", I do not mean that as a synonym for "difficult". Real social change *is* difficult, of course. But by complex I mean made up of many inter-related and interdependent parts. The reason I want to be clear about the distinction between complex and difficult is because we tend to conflate these two ideas. And I worry that this either scares us off trying to tackle complex challenges, or causes us to attempt to reduce complex challenges to something that looks and feels more manageable. In other words, we fundamentally prevent ourselves from seeing the true nature of the thing we're trying to change.

Complex systems are hard to read and impossible to manage. They exhibit behaviour that cannot be explained or predicted by looking at their individual parts. The whole is weirder than the sum of the parts because it is shaped by the dynamic interplay among them. They can also be highly resistant to efforts to change them. Push on a billiard ball and it moves (in direct proportion to the force you exert). Push on a complex system and nothing happens. Why then see complexity as an opportunity? Because complex systems can – and sometimes do – undergo rapid and remarkable transformations. Think about the tipping point phenomenon. Think about the fact that no one is smoking in this room. Twenty years ago, that would not have been the case. Today, you'd be hard pressed to find smoking in public

places almost anywhere in North America. That's a huge normative shift, all the more extraordinary when you consider the addictive grip of nicotine on behaviour. You don't have to change all the parts of a system in order to produce large-scale change – and you couldn't if you tried. But when the conditions are right, relatively small forces can yield some pretty dramatic effects.

The way complex systems work, and the way they can be harnessed to propel change, is laid out in a pretty compelling way in a book called Getting To Maybe. This is the book that came out of our work at the Social Innovation Think Tank. It was published late last year, and I'm making a shameless plug for it here. The cover states: "This book is for those who are not happy with the way things are and would like to make a difference...This is a book about making the impossible happen." It's not a how-to manual. But I guarantee it will change the way you think about change.

In our explorations at the Think Tank, we were looking to discover whether there were any discernible patterns of similarity across the very different examples of social transformation that we examined. The simple answer is yes. And that pattern looks surprisingly like Cecil's magic canoe.

Let me use the example of the elimination of smoking in public places to illustrate the pattern as I see it – the critical phases – in large-scale social transformation:

One: timing is crucial. The conditions must be right. "To everything there is a season," as the Bible says. And as every farmer knows, the field must be in the right state of readiness before it can yield. In the case of smoking bans, this is certainly what happened. The science had been done, clarifying the dangers not only of smoking but of exposure to second-hand smoke. Despite some tobacco-industry attempts to undermine it, the argument had become accepted as a "public truth". Society was ready to move from concern to action. (This, by the way, is exactly what is happening now around climate change.)

Two: Someone has to make an extraordinary leap of imagination. That is, they have to defy the logic of the present. To see beyond the veil of what is to what could be. In the case of smoking, there had been

numerous campaigns aimed at influencing the behaviour of individuals. These had some impact, but it wasn't sufficient in relation to the severity of the problem. But, given the prevalence of smoking just about everywhere – offices, boardrooms, restaurants, airplanes...you name it – it was outrageous to imagine that those places could ever be smoke-free. The scale of change, the consequences of disruption, the number of players who would have to buy-in...how could anyone even contemplate the transformation? But someone did contemplate it. In other words, social change starts with a preposterous notion.

Harvard psychologist, Daniel Gilbert, claims that the single greatest achievement of the human brain is to imagine the world as it is not and has never been. The leap of imagination is a giant step. It is the seminal act of transformative innovation. Yet it is usually dismissed, by the pragmatists among us, as the work of idle dreamers. And in this way, pragmatists become unwitting defenders of the status quo.

One of the very earliest proponents of smoking bans in public places was a guy in California. He wasn't attached to any formal institution. He was just seized with a sense of mission. And he became a tireless advocate who would not be defeated by all the disbelievers he encountered.

This brings me to the third common element in the pattern of social transformation. It is the act of leadership – but leadership of a very particular kind. We don't see it much – and don't expect it much – from our appointed leaders. Leaders of transformation are usually outriders...rogue elements. They can come from anywhere. They act with passion, but without permission. With courage, but without consensus. They are the first movers. And at first, they dream and act in isolation.

But their passion can ignite the will for difference-making in others. And so the fourth phase in social transformation is the emergence of what I call a "hot core". A small group of kindred spirits committed to the same imagined future. And conspiring to make it happen. "Conspire" is an interesting word. It comes from the Latin – *conspirare*, and literally means "to breathe together". They breathe the same spirit of urgency and possibility.

Next is a beta phase – a phase of experimentation and early adoption. In the case of smoking bans, the first companies and municipalities to try it out required intensive, hands-on assistance from outside experts, helping them to work through every messy step of the implementation

process. Though they didn't necessarily think of themselves this way, these places were in fact living laboratories, inventing and testing until they found solutions that worked. And then, of course, they became living proof that smoke-free environments were indeed achievable. A heavy investment in the early adopters pays off big time in social change strategies, because early adopters are proof of possibility. They send out signals to the larger system that cannot be ignored.

And that's when big change can start to happen. If one company or municipality can make its environment smoke-free, why can't another? The crazy idea no longer seems so crazy. So more come on board. And momentum starts to grow. The system starts to shift. And this releases tremendous creative energy. It's a lot like open system development. In fact, what happens is that innovation is no longer concentrated at the core. Rather, it becomes distributed throughout the growing network of players that are getting involved. And because everyone is smarter than anyone, experimentation on the ground helps the whole larger system adapt more rapidly. No one is in control of this dynamic emergent phase of social transformation. Change becomes self-propagating. It reaches a tipping point. And voila. No smoking anywhere.

If you're serious about making big change happen, it's crucial to pay close attention to these dynamics. To see transformative innovation as a continuous collective learning process. And to amplify the flow of signals and creative energy through the system. These are the positive feedback loops that help change to spread. The old military adage is true: No plan survives the start of battle. Real change needs more than a plan. It needs a relentless commitment to high purpose, and a conviction that the ends justify a continuous modification of the means.

Making big change happen is always and necessarily a creative endeavour, a journey into the unknown. Those are the rules of engagement that complex challenges set. One of my colleagues at the Social Innovation Think Tank, Brenda Zimmerman, had a vivid way of characterizing complex challenges by contrasting them to complicated ones:

"Complicated", she says, is putting a rocket on the moon. There are an enormous number of detailed steps that have to be taken. A vast range of factors to be addressed through all stages, from engineering to navigation. There's lots of room for error. But we know how to do it.

If we stick to the plan and execute with diligence, we'll get the rocket where we want it to go.

"Complex", she says, is raising a child. Here there is no certain outcome. Not even a clear stopping point. Yet our actions matter deeply. What we do as parents will have a profound effect on what our child becomes. But we can't know with certainty which of our actions will have the most lasting impact. The child evolves, and so must we in response. We learn and adapt from day-to-day experience. And we co-evolve in relationship to one another.

"Complicated" is essentially mechanical. "Complex" is essentially relational. "Complicated" is about acting *on*. "Complex" is about acting *with*. "Complicated" is appropriate in a world of predictable outcomes. "Complex" must acknowledge and respond to uncertainty.

Well, we are living in uncertain times. The 21st century faces humanity with unprecedented kinds of complex challenges. (These challenges are far more complex than eliminating smoking in public places, but, like that example, they will require the widespread engagement of whole systems at every level – of myriad institutions and individuals alike.) And, if we're honest with one another, our desire to make big things happen occurs against a backdrop of profound anxiety about the future. Despite the extraordinary comfort of our lives, and the truly exceptional wealth, accomplishments and competencies of our society, there are threats – both environmental and social – that could undermine it all.

We are living at one of those rare hinge points of history – a point that calls for a pretty radical rehaul of our basic operating systems. "Steady as she goes" is not a sensible course now. The need for transformative innovation is great.

Sustainability is obviously a defining issue of our time. The other, I believe, is less obvious but equally urgent. It is the insistent demand of all human beings for dignity – for a place at the table, for a life of worth. When human dignity is thwarted, our social ecologies become unsustainable. As Nelson Mandela once said: "Insecurity for some is insecurity for all."

These are the make-or-break anvils of our era. Our society. Our world. And very particularly, they are the deep challenges for our cities where humanity is increasingly clustered.

In a Canadian report entitled *Why Cities Matter*, researcher Neil Bradford argues that all the great policy questions of our day – economic, social, cultural and environmental – have now become urban questions.

And that means that cities will have to become the innovation engines of the 21st century. They will have to become the locus of great creativity and bold problem-solving capacity. While continuing to manage the business of the day-to-day, they will have to get a lot more serious about the business of tomorrow. They will have to be capable of making imaginative leaps – and mobilizing pattern-shifting change.

That will require more than just a few individual heroes with big ideas and big wills – though God knows we need them too. Rather, it will require a culture of creativity. A civic culture that is responsive to bold ideas, open to risk, and, most important, hopeful. A civic culture of creativity is the essential pre-condition to the transformative work ahead.

But cities are sluggish actors. The most complex of complex systems. Bound in their patterns. Stuck in their habits. Resistant to change. Inhospitable to breakthrough innovation.

True enough. But actually, not entirely true. Consider this:

Over the last decade, the city of Delhi has increased its green and forest cover a hundredfold – from 1.5% to 18%. And they did this, in large part, by mobilizing schools and kids and neighbourhood groups to get involved in tree-planting activities. In other words, this was an enormous civic engagement project. It was driven by a decision not only to green the city, but also to cultivate a sense of environmental responsibility in Delhi's citizens of the future.

Delhi has also managed to convert its entire public transportation fleet to natural gas. And this fleet includes not only city buses, but also taxis and auto-rickshaws owned by scores of independent operators. Think of the buy-in this must have required. It was a social conversion as well as a technical one. But it worked. And Delhi apparently now has the cleanest large fleet in the world.

Here's another example: The city of Bogotá in Colombia. A city of 7 million inhabitants that was renown for corrupt governance, urban chaos and violent crime has become – over the last 15 years – a

model for visionary politics, civic engagement and progressive urban planning. They've reduced their murder rate by close to 75%. They've reduced water usage by 40%. They've increased school enrolment by over 30%. They've implemented car-free days...created a world-class bus system...built a thousand public parks...300 km of bicycle and foot paths, and, over the next ten years, are planning to build 3000 km more. Their vision is to transform the city from a place for cars to a place for people, believing that hospitable public space is an essential ingredient for a safe, healthy and democratic society. According to the UN, Bogotá has emerged as "a model for transport and democracy for cities around the world".

This phenomenon has come to be known as the Bogotá Experiment, and indeed, over the last 15 years, the city has been a laboratory for civic innovation and risk-taking approaches to major problems. While they have been having a stunning impact on practical problems, the biggest change, in fact, might be psychological. In 2005, Mayor Enrique Penalosa said: "we've changed from a city that was almost despised by its inhabitants, where we were really hopeless and people thought that the worst thing that had happened to them in life was to have to live here, into a city where people are proud to live...where they can have a dream and make that dream a reality."

Courageous dreams and courageous experiments go hand in hand. Cities can embrace them. The cities that do will be the leaders of the future. The great cities. Addressing the compelling challenges of environmental and human well-being will stamp their character and forge their destiny. These challenges are not just about solving 21st century problems, but shaping 21st century identities. They will demand the highest forms of collective creativity. And they will stand as cultural accomplishments of the highest order – part of the deep narrative by which cities and their citizens come to know themselves.

For all its flaws and fault-lines, no city is more blessed than Toronto. From all over the world, people choose this place as home. No city could claim

a better start position on the future. But our future depends on our courage to meet it.

It's worth the dream. And it's worth the experiment.

I am glad and grateful you have committed yourselves to the task.

Good luck and *bon courage* over the next two days.

Eric Young, President, E.Y.E.
50 Prince Arthur Avenue, Suite 121
Toronto, Ontario M5R 1B5
ph: 416.967.1034
email: young@e-y-e.ca

• •