

**Symposium on Small Towns: Shaping our Future**  
**Center for Small Towns Morris, Minnesota**  
**June 7, 2005**

I am delighted to be in the company of people interested in conversation with the future who are committed to place. I have done work in the last three months on four continents and have just come back from China where a small town means less than 7 million people. By that measure I come from the small town of Chicago. As I was flying over Minnesota on my way here, I noticed the wondrous order of these small towns, the beauty of these places. I thought about how you have “all” in small, the advantage you have of being able to have it all in one place. And yet it is also manifestly true that what is happening in China and elsewhere is dramatically linked to your lives. (Get your children and grandchildren studying Chinese..!)

What you are doing over these next two days is a process happening all over the world...governments and citizens coming together in their localities to imagine and create new possibilities for their collective future.

Why is a conversation with the future so important to so many people? Because at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, human beings are faced with many challenges for which the learning in hand is simply not sufficient to the challenges at hand... challenges like the global context of democratization and an interdependent world economy; ecological imbalances which threaten the seamless web of living relationships; knowledge and information resources expanding exponentially with the costs of communication being driven to almost zero; cultural diversity and interaction increasing in ways which require new cooperation and mutual learning; shifting economic and organizational patterns changing the nature and availability of work. Escalating political and social violence across the world, growing disparities between haves and have nots, pandemics like HIV/AIDS that are lowering life expectancy in some countries by as much as 40 years, reinforce the urgency of finding new ways forward. The new learning required by these new circumstances must become a daily habit in our communities and governance debates; we must create generative spaces where structured exchanges of ideas, resources and experiences nurture understanding and hope and expand what’s possible to imagine and create. As Peter Drucker says, the leadership task is to find ways to align our strengths so our weaknesses become irrelevant.

That is the promise of this conference, to share what we see, to imagine more vital futures, and to lay the groundwork for moving toward them. Sharing stories of possibility that tune us to the frequency of hope is a radical and empowering act which stretches our spirits. We discover it is possible to understand more, to live more fully, to create more meaningful and effective connections. It will not be surprising if over the course of these next days you do not also hear stories of frustration. Grief and hope always seem to go hand in hand; Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech emerged only after speaking the truth about the deep sadness he felt over patterns of discrimination and exclusion. But as we know from his visionary witness, it is transforming (and counter

cultural) to give voice to our dreams, to invite one another into hope, to create space for possibility.

Why countercultural? We are living in a time in which cynicism passes for sophistication. Cynicism is a damaging habit of our public life; always destructive, a cheap way of eroding hope and acting as if someone with experience knows better than to think that new things are possible. If you care about opening up the future, I would challenge you to be resolute about renouncing cynicism and listening each other into hope, sharing what is possible, what has been tried and proved trustworthy, the connections and practices with which we can move forward together to imagine and create a more vital future.

How does one into a conversation with the future?

Let me share with you a personal answer to that. Fourteen years ago, I was a corporate banker running a banking division, an Episcopal priest running a black parish, the mother of three young children and active on nine civic boards. It was a complicated life not because it was so busy but because these worlds shared little common vocabulary and often function as parallel universes in our city. I began to notice the many ways our city was divided. I saw lots of young adults in despair in our city, anxious about their future, doubtful if they could find a way to make their lives count, with many young lives lost to violence and drugs. I began to talk with my friends about what it would take for many people to think about our city as a whole. As Ronald Marstin, a philosopher, once said, "Justice is fundamentally a matter of who is included and whom we can tolerate neglecting."

Wanting companions for my questions, I organized a conference on faith, imagination and public life. On the second night, people were asked to venture to describe images of Chicago's future and economy worthy of the commitment of our lives. The image that came to me was of the recycling symbol, three simple arrows in a circle, not just as an image of ecology but as a representation of an economy in which nothing and no one is wasted, in which everyone's participation counts. I began to imagine a city...

- **where everyone is valued**
- **where every citizen, young and old, applies their talents to create a positive future for themselves and their community.**
- **where hope comes alive in the flourishing and connecting of human lives**
- **where young people and others whose visions have been discounted develop and contribute their ideas and energy.**

Within three days of the conference, I had set aside a sixteen year corporate career to begin the work of discovering ways to bring such a vision to life. That's been Imagine Chicago's work for the past fourteen years.

IMAGINE CHICAGO has worked to create meaningful opportunities for everyone to discover a place to belong and a way to contribute that links their considerable gifts to the communities in which they live. How? By serving as a catalyst for creative connections, holding people accountable to the hope that is in them, and helping people become actively identified with and engaged in creating a positive and hopeful future for the city

through both discourse and action. We have challenged people and institutions to understand, imagine and create the future they value, to move from understanding and dreaming community to building it. This is mothering work in the way Sara Ruddick talks about in her wonderful book on maternal thinking. She says ‘motherhood is a sustained response to the promise embedded in the creation of new life.’ That for me is the challenge...how we bring worthy collective dreams to birth and honor the new life they represent by creating the structures that sustain them over a lifetime?

It was very challenging to know where to begin... We knew we wanted to create a superconductor process that gave more energy than it took. No one was looking for another meeting to attend. Two early decisions proved crucial to Imagine Chicago’s success. The first was that positive communication frameworks are essential to fostering hope and civic imagination. Words create worlds. What this means in practice is focusing on positive topics, positive questions, and asking them to people who are known to care. Why? People want and need to think constructively. Appreciative questions around constructive topics serve as positive orientation points that move us forward and help us draw on best experiences that can help get us there. They reduce threatening and defensive behaviors and responses.

Much public discourse is problem and deficit oriented. To frame community regeneration in problem talk creates expertise and focus on what communities don’t want and what doesn’t work. To shift from deficit to visionary language opens up possibilities and energy for community renewal. When inquiry helps communities identify and name strengths, skills, hopes, values, assets and constructive ideas, a positive community image and identity grows which can inspire higher participation and attract investment. Magnifying one another’s positive stories can create constructive experiences of difference that builds positive relationships even across well-established divides of age, race, class and geography. (As a priest, I think of this as fundamentally a matter of creating a culture of blessing rather than curse. Benediction is “saying good things.” We need to find more ways to bless each other. Our language is a primary way we can do that.)

The second key insight we had was that young people should occupy a prominent leadership position. There were two reasons for this. Since we were focused on developing our city’s future, we wanted the future to be asking the questions about the best of the past, learning from that experience and holding adults accountable to the hope that was in them. We knew that in order for new possibilities to be raised up, it would be necessary to disarm the cynicism that passes for sophistication. We thought young people held the best hope for doing that.

The initial IMAGINE CHICAGO project therefore engaged area teenagers, mostly poor ones living in public housing who were then being publicly referred to as a ‘lost generation’, to interview important “glue people,” in order to understand what would contribute to a positive future for all of CHICAGO and reconnect communities that had been chronically isolated. 50 youth-at-risk interviewed 200 adult community builders in Chicago about the highlights of their lives as citizens, what they had seen as effective processes for bringing the community together, and their hopes and plans for the city’s

future. (This process now replicated in many communities across the world—Cass County to Nagaland). (Story of Tim Wilborn interviewing Gertrude Nielsen. Grew up in the worst public housing in Chicago. She ended up paying his way to college, when she was 96 years ago. Became fast friends. He went on to found Imagine Detroit and Imagine Serbia.)

Intergenerational appreciative inquiry proved very inspiring and motivating. Adult commitments were refreshed. Hope came alive. New possibilities for engagement were imagined and shared. Asking positive open ended questions was successful in establishing a lively sense of shared civic identity, creating effective methods for constructive intergenerational dialogue, and expanding the sense among the young people that they could make a difference.

Imagine Chicago has since developed over 100 partnerships in Chicago involving a wide range of individuals and institutions ...grassroots leaders who want to improve their neighborhoods and learn from the innovations of other committed citizens ...public schools who want to learn from museums ... teachers who want to make sense of their vocations and re-imagine education...immigrant and faith communities who want to explore the promise of democracy and American pluralism... school children and parents who want to understand and impact the systems and communities of which they are a part. All involve creating learning partnerships that develop imaginative, effective citizens with the skills, hope and courage to actively shape the future of communities. And the work has now spread to 6 continents.

### **Moving from Idea to Action**

Central to all of Imagine Chicago's initiatives is a common approach to learning which moves from idea to action:

- Understand what is (focusing on best of what is)
- Imagine what could be (working in partnerships with others)
- Create what will be (translating what we value into what we do)

#### *Understand*

All projects begin with and are grounded in asking and teaching others to ask open-ended, asset and value-oriented questions about what is life-giving, what is working, what is generative, what is important. The focus is on asking positive questions that encourage sharing of best practices, articulation of fundamental values, and which reveal the positive foundation on which greater possibilities can be built. E.g. what is something your child has accomplished that you are especially proud of? What about your family, this school, is especially effective in encouraging children to learn? What questions interest you most right now? (bene-dictus – saying good things...positive discourse as a form of blessing)

Importance of understanding mental maps out of which people are operating---

#### *Imagine*

New possibilities are inspired by hearing questions or stories that cause us to wonder and stretch our understanding beyond what we already know. When we are invited to

articulate or hear from others what's important and is working, we readily imagine how even greater transformation and innovation can happen. In a learning community, our collective imaginations continually envisage more. Grass roots leaders discussing what they have helped change on their block inspires others to try and make a difference. Young parents sharing stories of how they are caring for their children leads others to good parenting practices. Oliver Wendell Holmes suggested long ago "a mind once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimensions". This stretching of our imagination happens naturally. I still remember vividly a powerful image offered by an elderly interviewee in the original Imagine Chicago intergenerational interview process, who said, "I imagine a city where critical thinking is so common that politicians can never trade on ignorance." Hearing it started me thinking about the connections between education and democracy in a way I had not earlier considered.

Each and every human being possesses the enormous gift of imagination. Imagination is necessarily inclusive and utterly democratic: Envisioning is the realm of the future, of freedom, where new possibilities can break in if we are willing to be dream bearers. The greater the diversity of the people involved, the stronger the movement of imagination, and the more likely a balanced and just future for ourselves and our children. Example: transport in Mandurah. Suicide prevention. Welcoming everyone's voice can sometimes make the difference between life and death. Story of Jeff Brennan.

### *Create*

For imagination to help create community change, it needs to be embodied in something concrete and practical ...*a visible outcome* that inspires more people to invest themselves in making a difference. In *Citizen Leaders*, the program in which Tina was involved, grass roots leaders are invited to articulate their visions for community change and then create imaginative community development project of their own design. In the course of four months of interactive forums, they learn to recruit volunteers, design and organize a project, prepare a proposal, and implement, evaluate and sustain their projects. Learning occurs largely through community change agents sharing experiences with each other within a common framework of organizing questions. In 1996, a group of committed citizens involving 6 leaders and 25 team members, from the same low-income Chicago neighborhood, participated together in this program. They created projects including block clubs, community gardens, intergenerational sports programs, and a youth club. With support from a local community organization, these emerging block leaders helped launch a neighborhood-wide program to bring residents together to collectively address important issues. The *Every Block is a Village* program they started is now an organization of 60 block clubs, each with resident 'citizen leaders,' which organizes around community issues like community cleanliness, economic development, and youth opportunities. The process is continually strengthened by sharing stories weekly about what has happened and how and lessons learned. As their successes grow, so does their confidence and skill level. The visible outcomes and growing volunteer effort attract the commitment of other individuals who see it's possible to make a difference. This past quarter the BBC was in Chicago filming EBV as a story of possibility broadcast all over the UK.

Understand-Imagine-Create. Engaging a conversation with the future... This work can save lives, can actually be a matter of life and death.

(Example: Jeff Brennan and meeting in Mandurah. Young person only marginally involved in youth forum asked if he could make a presentation on youth suicide. Did so at meeting of “town elders” in which he told his own story of trying to take his life, for the first time. Has since gone on to found Youth Prevention Hotline and be President of local Youth Advisory Council.

Coming together in this sort of meeting we are having here calls us more deeply into life. When our ideas are listened to, when we begin to share what we see, what we hope for, what we care about, what we see as possible and important, something new happens. Latent ideas come into clear consciousness. The sharing of ideas inspires deeper thinking and questions and innovation. Communities of interest become identified to one another. Democracy gets re-discovered as a creative activity. Government becomes more creative and accountable.

To see the future as viable, we need an active sense that our lives and contribution count, that our choices make a difference to the outcome. As Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and social activist, once said, “Living is more than submission; it is creation. Once we begin to change this street and this city, we begin to discover our power to transform the world.”

I spoke earlier about the challenge of motherhood—sustaining over a lifetime a response to the promise of new life. Now I want to encourage you to think of yourselves as skilled birth attendants, midwives—who help community futures emerge. It is a maieutic vocation—a great word from Socratic philosophy which comes from the Greek word for midwife and means to bring latent ideas into clear consciousness.

Any midwife knows that giving birth is a messy business and can be dangerous. Giving birth involves tremendous labor pains. There are forces at work that we simply cannot see, including the force of life itself. That is part of the mystery and wonder. The availability of skilled birth attendants is one of the best indicators of whether mothers will live or die when they give birth. Those of us who are facilitating public participation in charting community futures are acting as community midwives.

The leadership challenges confronting us in doing this work are complex and require a range of perspectives. Let me give you some sense of this by asking you to think about the shape of the future....

### **Slide 1: Leaders must deal with 3 types of complexity**

Some of you may be familiar with the book *Presence* that was released this year by Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer.

**Dynamic complexity:** cause and effect are distant in time and space;  
*requires whole systems approach*

**Social complexity:** actors have different views and interests;  
*requires multi stakeholder approach to take account of behavioral,  
cultural worldview differences*

**Generative complexity:** what's happening tomorrow cannot  
be predicted from past; innovation is disruptive;  
*requires sensing and presencing approach*

**Slide 2: How do we sense the future? Is there an integrated approach we can use to address the 3 levels of complexity? How do we help shape the fields of collective attention?**

How we think about this involves thinking about how change happens:

**Slide 3: Levels of change opening mind, opening heart, opening will**  
(think of artist before a canvas.... Can observe product, process but not source of inspiration...)

**Slide 4:**

**How do we hold space to attend to and discover sources of inspiration and collective imagination about the future???**

May involve creatively changing structures (who is in the room, how space is organized), reframing problem talk into possibilities, creating opportunities for empathic listening, introducing creative processes which open participants to multiple perspectives in a field.

Some simple ways of doing this: my then 10 year old daughter Caroline told me in 1992 "if you have the most FUN meetings, everyone will want to come to your meetings instead of the other ones. So from the beginning we thought about community change as a realm of creativity. Imagine forums usually include some form of arts based activities: music, movement, community drama, drawing, sculpture as communities come together to envision and create a more vital future. The use of the arts has not only re-introduced lots of fun; it has reminded people that democracy is a creative, engaging enterprise. Integrating artistic expression into community development expands people's confidence and self understanding as creators.

n.b. Letting come requires letting go first. Hard for all of us to do. Once we let go, we can begin to discover more vital images toward which we can move.

**Slide 5: Futures Triangle**

**Need to attend to pull of the future in addition to push of future. Capture that pull in images towards which we can move.**

Example: Earlier this year the Centre for Community Regeneration of Communities Scotland invited me to run a masterclass with 100 community developers, city councilors, and policy makers. I asked them to capture briefly what they had discovered made community regeneration possible. Within fifteen minutes, they came up with a wondrous set of images and best practices:

- ❖ **Reframing leadership from expert model to teamwork serving the whole.** Image: *musicians jamming*. Best players give up power to support the whole.
- ❖ **Trusting open-ended process.** Image: *an open book*. Some chapters are not yet written but there is a history here. Communities get to write their own next chapters building on a proud past. Requires policymakers to respond to what communities propose rather than to set out agenda communities have to fulfill.
- ❖ **Harnessing local energy rather than social control.** Second image: *bureaucratic maze drawing- garden with only one way in*. Sorry no way through. This way only. Expected/accepted route. Above maze hovers pair of individuals mutually supporting each other, “How do we know we cannot fly?” How can the future be determined by communities rather than by external forces?
- ❖ **Clear and open communication with positive framing and actions.** “*Bloomin’ communities*” or “*communities in bloom*”? Solving problems creates co-dependency between organizations and problems. There is an alternative. Image: bright yellow flower not yet finished growing. Grass roots are ideas (ah-ha moments). Stems of development support growth.
- ❖ **Following path of hope and respect.** Image: Path of hope with inspiring people...fun...laughter, telling stories, working in partnership, engaging...optimism, creativity, action purpose honesty, realism, this makes sense to me...
- ❖ **Risk taking.** Image: *Can of worms in various stages of being opened*. Have to risk opening can of worms for other things to become possible. Various stages of openness. But if you open up the cans, worms can escape. Mayor of Singapore: important not to confuse worms and butterflies.

All of these images represent a fundamental shift in perspective in how we think about communities and local control.

### **Slide 6: How does change happen? How do we keep from alienating or threatening the existing power relationships?**

Relationship of tradition to innovation to management of change. Let everyone know they matter, but encourage them to move to the edge of their circles, to discover broader view. Need to help ensure constructive experience of difference. We need everyone to be true to their gift—as a conservator, innovator, bureaucrat. But also need then to be in creative dialogue with all of the members of the change process. Standing at the edge of their own circle places them at the center of a much larger circle, a vantage point from which they can see the whole.

### **Tradition – Innovation – Managed Change**

#### **Slide 7:**

Imagine Chicago has found that to give birth to *collective* dreams first requires shifting how we speak and see, where our attention is. Many people live, some by choice, in isolated communities, which has led to a loss of imagination and connection. We must

risk moving to the edge of established comfort zones, encountering people different from us who challenge our worldviews and language and open our minds. The next move is to listen carefully, to ‘walk a mile in someone else’s shoes.’ Hearing what others have lived, what it is possible to live, stretches our imagination about life. Sharing stories around meaningful questions (across divides of race and age and clan) offers a path to empathic seeing and listening which opens the heart. Listening and respecting what gives meaning and purpose to our lives, what calls us forward, transforms us, can begin to heal our divisions. Combining stories with arts-based processes frees imagination and opens up sources of inspiration. Deep change can emerge once we are able not only to digest necessary information, redesign structures, and reframe mindsets but attend to and align our actions with sources of collective inspiration and will, becoming faithful to one another and the future which is trying to emerge.

Active citizenship requires both confidence and competence—confidence that peoples' highest aspirations are possible to translate into action and competence to do so. How can we help individuals and institutions learn to think ‘WE’ to think as partners and to live this way, acting together to create a positive future that otherwise would not exist?

To create a sense of common purpose that inspires democratic participation requires a shift from single sector problem solving to focusing on what communities value and how to organize productive partnerships within which those values can be lived. This is a struggle because professionals have been trained to think as competent experts with answers rather than as community partners with questions. Community partnerships make clear that we are vulnerable, don’t have all the answers ourselves, and depend upon one another. Furthermore, partnerships have not been the habit in our professional lives. So we need our confidence raised that partnerships can be collaborations, can accomplish more than we can accomplish on our own, in short, are worth running the risk of vulnerability because a greater good can be accomplished. Talking together about what is of most value, the life giving forces and energies at the heart of a community or organization’s life, builds partnership. When connections are built heart-to-heart, mission-to-mission, the process reinforces core values, enables democratic participation and rekindles commitment to personal and institutional integrity.

As meaning-making people, we need transcendent connections and a sense of purpose. That requires connecting to generative sources, life giving sources, that call us beyond our fears and failures. And it requires communities from which we can learn, draw courage and recognize that our individual effort is leveraged and exalted when put together with others. We learn to trust people to own their own issues and resources, to do our share but not more than our share, to encourage everyone to play their part in a way that gives life to the whole. Imagine Chicago lives out of an imagination about human life and community that says everyone’s gifts are necessary to our common life; we cannot live without each other and thrive. People find hope and inspiration by being connected to things that are bigger than we are.

Hope alone is realistic; it perceives the scope of our real possibilities. Hope does not strive after things that have no place but after things that have no place *as yet* but can acquire

one. **Hope is a choice not a feeling.** We must tune ourselves to the frequency of hope and listen each other into hope by the questions we ask and the questions we live. This requires moving from deficit language to the language of vision and imagination. Language is a moral issue; it does not only describe, it creates. So if we want a positive future for our communities and our world, we must attend to creating the language and the images out of which that worthy future can be developed.

**Every voice is important.** Building socially inclusive communications and civic engagement is important not just as a matter of social justice but as a foundation for stewarding democracy. Democracy depends fundamentally on everyone's freedom and willingness to act, to create, and to participate actively in shaping the discourse and institutions by which we live. Out of dialogue in which everyone has a share, new things will emerge including the reshaping of our own self-understanding and the invention and establishment of language that is more enabling. Democracy is constituted (that's why democracies are usually based on a Constitution) through voluntary discourses and practices.

In a time of cynicism and distrust, it takes all of us, women and men, to embrace a collective vocation of being dream bearers and dream keepers of community futures. What will enable us to open our minds, hearts and wills to see one another as unique creators, to trust one another and the 'freefall' of giving birth to something new? What will nurture our willingness to work together on behalf of a community future in which life flourishes for everyone? How will we create more pathways to participation? How can we involve every level of the system to create a worthy future for our world?

### **Slide 9**

Bearing hope into the world is only the beginning; creating the conditions for new life to flourish on a sustained basis is work that requires the time, resources and commitment of the whole human family. Every newborn needs love, food, water, shelter, and an opportunity to learn, in order to survive and thrive. Our community dreams (and mothers) require no less. The blessing is that in this deeply ordinary human work, we rediscover the commitment, purpose, mystery, and deep magic that aligns our lives and the whole system in a more life-giving direction. Listen and love. That brings hope alive.

---Bliss W. Browne

June 7, 2005

For more information, see [www.imaginechicago.org](http://www.imaginechicago.org)  
Contact Bliss at [bliss@imaginechicago.org](mailto:bliss@imaginechicago.org) or 773-275-2520