

BRADWIN ADDRESS

89th Annual Meeting of Frontier College
October 22, 1988

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IT IS AN HONOUR TO BE INVITED TO GIVE the Bradwin Address at the 89th Annual General Meeting of Frontier College. I consider it a great distinction to be numbered among those eminent people who have given this address in the past. Frontier College has a history of being, and can continue to be I believe, an agent of social good in our nation. I hope that my words today will foster this capacity of our venerable College to bring about a better world.

There are a number of reasons, I suspect, why I would be chosen to give this talk this year. For one thing, I am obviously a member of a group of people who have been pushed out to the margins of our society. I say "obviously" somewhat tongue-in-cheek for in fact I am unusual among disabled people. I have a job, I live in my own home, I have been able to avoid ongoing poverty, I have a good education and I have a large network of friends, colleagues, and even a husband. Frontier College has had a great deal to do with these accomplishments, and I will speak more of this later. But I have lived on the margins, and have fought hard to become a participating citizen. It is an experience worth speaking about.

Another reason for choosing me is that I have thought a lot about what it takes to make real community for people. I am a thinker and a dreamer, and I have been watching the people around me. I have gathered something of a reputation for being a visionary, and today I want to explore one expression of this vision. Let's look at what fosters community; community capable of meeting the needs of all people in all their diversity.

There is a theme that has nurtured my pondering for a number of years. This theme is found in an ancient scriptural passage which is dear to both Jews and Christians. It was written by disciples of Isaiah at a time when Israel was struggling with political humiliation and social crisis. It was quoted by Jesus as a way of announcing his mission of spiritual liberation. I am taking this passage from the Jerusalem Bible.

*The Spirit Of Yahweh Has Been Given To Me,
For Yahweh Has Anointed Me.
He Has Sent Me To Bring Good News To The Poor,
To Bind Up Hearts That Are Broken;*

*To Proclaim Liberty To Captives,
Freedom To Those In Prison;
To Proclaim A Year Of Favour From Yahweh,
A Day Of Vengeance For Our God,*

*To Comfort All Those Who Mourn And To Give Them
For Ashes A Garland;
For Mourning Robes The Oil Of Gladness,
For Despondency, Praise
They Are To Be Called "Terebinths Of Integrity,"
Planted By Yahweh To Glorify Him.*

*They Will Rebuild The Ancient Ruins,
They Will Raise What Has Long Lain Waste,
They Will Restore The Ruined Cities,
All That Has Lain Waste For Ages PAST.*

This passage, found in *Isaiah* 61, verses 1-4, speaks about how those who are members of society, and those who are marginalized from society, have a great need for each other's gifts. We are told that when the captives are liberated, and when the poor have heard the good news, they will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places that have been devastated.

This need for each other is not perfectly obvious. On the one hand those who are on the margin are usually there for very good reasons. Society often cannot respond smoothly to these people and their needs. Perhaps the physical environment is an obstacle to a person, and he or she is seen as physically handicapped. Perhaps this one has not learned as quickly or as well as others, or perhaps he or she is more active, or more impulsive, or more curious than most folks, and so he or she is seen as impaired in mind, or as a criminal, or as just simply dangerous. In any case the presence of this person disrupts the flow of things as they are, and makes ordinary activity and daily decisions difficult to carry out. The margin may be a dangerous place, but at least there you know who you are, and you are not constantly facing disapproval and discomfort.

On the other hand there is the "ordinary" citizen who fits in, who learns, who knows the ropes and how to swing on them. In this there is peace and protection from challenge. Why would the members of these two groups want to have anything to do with each other when this can only disrupt a workable system?

The passage from *Isaiah* gives us the eternal answer, although the answer calls forth other questions. Without welcoming the gifts of the stranger, society is doomed to slowly crumble under the weight of its own inertia.

It is certainly clear that breakdown is happening in every part of our world today. Everywhere the numbers of people who live in the streets and in the prisons increase, and everywhere children swell the ranks of these homeless ones, because they see no future in school or in work for themselves. Our environment is degraded to the point where its own healing powers may not be able to cope with the damage even if we were to stop despoiling our planet today. Other crises abound, so much so that there is a great temptation to bury one's head in the sand.

The sand of ordinary life is lived in community where people spend their days doing very ordinary things. They write, talk on telephones, teach children, play with babies, wash dishes, go for walks, read books, and cry on each other's shoulders. All of this happens in ordinary places on commonplace streets, all the time, everywhere. This very commonness is a real gift, a real benefit not to be ignored. It is perfectly understandable that we should want to protect our ordinary lives from the kind of change that crisis and the stranger threaten to force on us. And that desire to lose oneself in everyday activity is real, for don't we all long for a peaceful and ordinary life? What do we know about dealing with these overwhelming problems?

But change comes whether we are prepared for it or not. If we are to cope with the challenge of crisis then we need the gift of changing. This gift is not to be found among ordinary people; ordinary people have the gift of everydayness.

The gift of surviving and growing through change belongs to the outcast. Ancient writings tell us this and modern experience confirms it. Living on the edge of chaos changes the people who survive it. You

become very aware of the value of things ordinary citizens take for granted; things like having your opinion listened to, having a chance to make a mistake, to be forgiven and to have a chance to try again; things like having friends and family who celebrate holidays with you and who will tell their friends that you are looking for a job. Living on the margin either burns you out and kills you, or it turns you into a dreamer, someone who really knows what sort of change will help and who can just about taste it; someone who is prepared to do anything to bring about change. If these dreamers are liberated, if they are brought back into the arms of society, they become the architects of the new community; a community that has a new capacity to support everyone's needs and interactions. But how can this really be, especially since these dreamers still have the characteristics that marked them as outcasts in the first place? They will still lack good judgement, or find it hard to learn to read, or to be disabled. Solving this problem is critical, for otherwise the outcasts and the ordinaries are very good at maintaining an invisible wall between their two worlds.

This reminds me of certain parties I was invited to when I was a child. Once a year some group would put on a party and invite all the disabled children and their parents. This would always include a turkey dinner or hot dogs and ice cream, and each child would always get a present. At other times these same people would raise money to buy equipment or send us off to the camp for "crippled" children. I sometimes wonder if those men hated the parties as much as we did, especially after we got to be ten years old or so. Our parents wanted us to go because they depended on their charity to meet our extraordinary needs, but we always knew that these people were not a real part of our lives, and that they didn't really want to know us as friends. Otherwise I could have gone to camp with their sons and daughters, and I could have visited some of them at their homes, and they would have visited mine. As it was, we never got to see each other as real people, nor did they ever get to see me as real.

No, for the citizen and the outcast to come together, to dream and work together, to rebuild community together, something different must happen. This difference depends upon the quality of the relationship built between the one who is reaching out and the one who is reaching in.

There usually comes a time in the lives of people who are living on the margin when they are prepared to risk giving up their identities as outcasts to try to become participating citizens of community. For an exoffender it might be a moment of finally wanting to go straight, to get a job; for the disabled person it might come as a time of wanting to move out of a group home, to get a job. For me it came nine years ago this month when I was living in a chronic care hospital not far from here. I use the term "living" loosely because in fact I was dying from a combination of malnutrition, overdoses of prescribed drugs, and a sense of hopelessness born from ten years of fighting without success to get needed attendant care. From my earliest childhood, doctors had told me that I could not live to see my 30th birthday, and nine years ago, weeks away from that day, I figured that my days were numbered. And I was angry. I was prepared to work hard at living my own life, and I was prepared to help others where I could, but I was still looking for the break that I needed to be able to really become myself. I decided that living inside the hospital and trying to survive outside it were about equal risks for me. I moved out. Five months later I was still alive, but all my resources ran out and I collapsed. I could have ended up back in the hospital or I might have tried suicide, but something fundamental had changed in my life during that year, and so I can tell you a different story.

I had friends. One woman had reached out to me while I was still in the hospital. She used to do things like share meals with me, invite me to her home, ask me to help her in a variety of ways, and work with me on different projects. For months I didn't know how to respond to her because I didn't know what a friend was, but eventually I opened up to her and we have become very close. While I was in the hospital and in the months before my collapse, she was introducing me to her friends and family and telling them how we worked together, not how unfortunate I was to be so different. Her husband build a ramp on their house so that I could enter with ease. As friends together we celebrated my 30th birthday.

When my collapse happened, friends took me to her house. She called together 14 of our friends and colleagues and they worked out a plan to get me back to work, back to life, back to fighting trim again. Within six days I was living in a new apartment of my own, with a full staff of attendants, with a loan to pay their salaries, and I was back at work. Then we sat down together to work out a way to get the government to pay for this real service. Within three months we had the first contract in Canada for an individually funded attendant care programme. We had to find an agency to channel the contract, since the government is unable to give funding directly to an individual. We approached Frontier College to perform this role and Frontier said "Yes". Frontier is still my agent.

Today there are hundreds of individually funded arrangements across Canada, standing as a witness to what will be the ordinary way to fund attendant care some day. But my support group achieved the first one. I call this group the Joshua Committee, and of course, Jack Pearpoint, Marsha Forest and I were the founders of my Joshua Committee.

Clearly that is not the end of the story. The Joshua Committee continues to play a very important role in my life. During the first year of working together there was a lot of yelling on all sides. After all we came from different sides of the picture, and we didn't know how to trust and listen to each other. I had a lot of growing and changing to do to make up for years of lack of opportunity and of living up to the definition of myself as being disabled. On the other hand, the other members of the Joshua Committee had no reason to believe that I could live the way I thought I could, or that my dreams were based on my real gifts. We had to learn to be bound by each others dreams, abilities, and limitations. We had to be community for each other. One other lesson had to be learned. This is a lesson that I have seen others struggle with as well. Ordinary citizens seem to believe that once a person has been brought into community with the initial problems solved, things will continue along just fine. It seems easy to forget that even though we undoubtedly have gifts, there still is a pressure that pushes us toward the margin again. In my case people will always see me as severely disabled no matter what I do or become. This expresses itself now and then as some government official deciding that it is time for me to go back to the hospital. Then my contract for attendant care money doesn't get renewed. Once this happened about six years ago when the Joshua Committee hadn't met for several months, and we were deep into a crisis before we all could work together well again. For true community building to take root, the stranger and the citizens have to make a permanent commitment to each other; one that may change in form several times but that continues with fulfilling interaction on all parts.

Frontier College has participated in a number of formal and not so formal commitments, that have welcomed strangers in from the margins of society. Frontier/Beat the Street draws on what street kids already know and care about to liberate their minds and their will to become a creative part of society. Frontier/HHELP depends on the smarts, the dogged perseverance and the vision of people who have been literal outlaws. In fact from the very beginning Frontier College has welcomed the stranger in the one who could not read, so that he or she could participate, making Canada a stronger place to be. The board, members, volunteers, staff and friends of Frontier College have understood what it takes to be true liberators. She has stayed strong through building a continuing relationship with the very people she has welcomed in.

Frontier College is now eighty-nine years old. I believe that as the dust settles others will look to Frontier College as a model of how to build creative organizations in the communities of the future. Her strength comes from her tradition of allying herself with the dreamers on the edge. My hope is that this kind of partnership will continue to be the heart of the College in the future. I am confident that it will.

Happy 89th Birthday Frontier College.