

Conversations on
**Citizenship &
Person-Centered Work**



EDITED BY

Volume III

John O'Brien & Carol Blessing

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Conversations on Citizenship & Person-Centered Work

with

Beth Mount • Diana Whitney

Michael Smull • Denise Bissonnette

Jack Pearpoint • Mike Green

Connie Ferrell • John O'Brien

Editors

Volume III

John O'Brien & Carol Blessing



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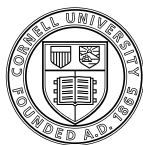
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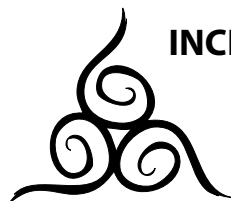
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Denise Bissonnette



Two years ago, I was asked to present a workshop titled “Beyond Barriers to Passion and Possibility”. As I thought about how to help people see beyond their limitations and really take in their potential and their possibilities, I thought of the many roles we have to play. We have to be the dreamer and the gambler and the coach and the explorer. What came to me was a poem from the point of view of the people that we serve. This is what I believe they would say to us if they could.

Blue Skies

*Pardon me, what's that you say,
"This interview is finished?"
Excuse me, but I've hardly spoken,
Don't leave me here diminished.
I'm so sorry to disappoint you,
To not have the problem you like to fix,
Instead I come with my own story,
With mystery in the mix.

You see, my hope is shallow, my fear is deep,
I have dreams I can barely dream,
But once in a while I can glimpse blue skies,
Just up the road it seems.
So, if you're the kind who likes to keep it simple,
Hey, I can handle that,
But please, don't pass me on
To another bureaucrat!*

*Is there anyone here who peers beyond,
Who looks behind the smile,
Cuz there's a lot about me you will not know
By opening up that file.*

*Is there anyone here who listens
In that rare and tender fashion,
Who'll catch the meaning between my words,
With the net of their compassion?*

*Is there anyone here who gardens,
Who tends the smallest of seeds,
Cuz sometimes I feel things growin' in me,
Beyond that list of needs!*

*Is there anyone here who's a gambler?
Who'll back a wounded horse?
Cuz I need someone with some faith in me
To set me on right course.*

*Is there anyone here who's a coach,
The one who loves that final lap,
Someone who will coax from me,
Resources hidden and untapped?*

*Is there anyone here who's a dreamer,
Who sees with faraway eyes,
Cuz my choices are looking rather dismal,
But I'm open to surprise!*

*Is there anyone here who's an explorer,
Who searches for truth beyond the facts,
Who'll focus on my possibilities
And not just what I lack?*

*Because you see, when I go home today
And my family asks, "How did it go down there?"
They're not just asking about my day,
They're pleading for me to report to them,
"Hey, I'm on my way –
Somewhere hopeful, somewhere new,
Just up ahead those skies are blue!"*

So, if that's not you, that's okay,

*I can handle that,
 But please don't pass me on
 To another bureaucrat!*

*So go ahead, scan the place,
 Find the one who's on a mission,
 To change the world, one life at a time,
 Start with mine, you've my permission!*

*Cuz my hope is shallow, my fear is deep,
 I have dreams I can barely dream,
 But once in a while I can glimpse blue skies,
 Just up the road it seems.*

*I don't need anyone totally brilliant,
 Or particularly worldly or wise,
 Just send me to that someone
 Who believes in bright blue skies!*

We are called to the holy work of helping people understand that space between who they are today, where they are today, and who they could be, where they could be, is the fertile ground that calls for imagination and creativity. It's the space where we question assumptions and explore ideas. It's the place that calls for incredible courage and incredible hope.

When people go into the world to work for the first time, they may be running low on hope and courage. In this difficult transition, we've got to show up and give people a vision of themselves that is much bigger than the one they see in the mirror. So creativity isn't an extra that we bring to the job, it is the very essence of what we do.

If I could make only one contribution to this field, it would be that people would bring the fierce powers of their imagination and their creativity to their work every day, seeing not only the potential and the possibility of the people that are in front of them, but their own as well and holding to a fierce belief in bright blue skies.

What is citizenship?

I believe what Native Americans believe: that every person born to this earth is born with gifts. It's totally impossible to be born

without them. No one's birth was a mistake. We all come here with something to give. And it is in the giving that these gifts become medicine, for the world, for the tribe, for the family, the school, the agency. The health and the wholeness and the vitality of any community requires 100% participation of every member of that community.

Citizenship carries responsibility, "You have come with medicine the world greatly needs." This is a message that people with disabilities haven't heard much. Instead, it's all about, "What can we do for you? What do you need from us?" I like the idea of turning the table. "What do you have to give? Where you going to give it?" I have worked with refugees and immigrants for years, so another thing that occurs to me when I think about citizenship is that at the point when they become citizens, there is a sense that "I'm not a visitor anymore. I'm native. This is my home." That's something we all want to feel in our communities and something we all have a right to.

What do you think has kept disabled people from the typical, everyday roles of citizenship?

Older people who have disabilities grew up at a time where we had a patronizing view. It wasn't necessarily based in bigotry or prejudice, but an attitude that, "We're going to take care of you." If you were raised without the expectation that you will participate, that may be something you never questioned.

I'm so happy that children with disabilities are being raised in a different world, a world that recognizes that we need the gifts they have to bring and that it is their birthright to be able to bring them.

What is leadership?

When I think of leadership, I think of Ghandi's tenet, "Be the change you wish to see". Leadership is often associated with a role or a status. But to me it's a quality that we all need to learn to bring to everyday situations. It's not the province of a fortunate few; it is the birthright of every human being. If we looked at all times in the course of a day, or a week when we are asked to make a choice, to pose a question, to advocate for a cause, we'd see many opportunities to show leadership.

What inspires you?

I love this world. We live in such a cool universe. I love the earth and the many lessons drawn from nature on how to be human. I'm inspired by people who have found their own voice; who see what they see and say it; people who like to live in color and are comfortable in their own skin. I like being around little children because that comes naturally to them. I love being around elders because, at the end of life, we're often very authentic. It's that time in between that we have to learn how "to be". I'm inspired by people who have found their gifts and a way to give them to the world whether or not it's through paid employment. Seeing self-expression in its many forms inspires me.

How can people make a positive difference in the lives of those who use disability services?

The deep work that people who work in this field do is to acknowledge the person inside the client. They're not a consumer or a participant. They are a human being with a whole life and a lot to give and a lot of opinions and personality. We need to meet people there, in their humanity, as people first. To dignify people and to treat them with the respect that they deserve has more to do with what we have to offer as people than it does with the services themselves. It's the spirit of the service that's everything. People know the difference.

I think there's incredible opportunity for every person who works in this field to use their influence to effect the work that we do, because it's all about connections in real community. People think they are their job descriptions: "I'm the job developer", or "I'm the manager". When we think that way, we don't bring all of the resources we have to the office because it's not on our job description. We have many resources because we're all connected, we're all part of a larger web. When we get out of the thinking that we are only our job description and realize that we live in a world with incredible potential for connection, we start seeing connections where we haven't noticed them before. The person coming for service has a circle of connections too. It's the overlapping of circles where change happens.

What is community?

Community comes about when people find unity from what they have in common. You can be in a neighborhood where there is no community because simply living on the same block hasn't given cause for you and your neighbors to gather. You can have community within a workplace or a choir or a book club because some common purpose holds you together. Community is unity through commonality.

How does somebody actually build community?

Community building begins with grounding people in what it is that brings them together, whatever that common purpose or those values are, and then very consciously acknowledging the importance of each person's presence. Everyone needs to feel, "My presence here is precious. I actually matter. I have a voice." There needs to be some deep investment by every member in the actual building of the community. Community building entails people taking the time to define for themselves what their community is, what rights and responsibilities come with it.

We're all born with natural gifts, something unique to give that's as natural to us as flight is to the bird. We can't not use these gifts without doing terrible damage to our own humanity. The healthiest communities treat as one of their greatest challenges to unearth the natural gifts of each member so that the whole can be bigger than the sum of the parts.

What does work mean to you?

Work is one of my favorite words and it is my favorite form of play. Maybe it's because I have found work that brings me so much joy. Everybody works, whether or not they're ever paid to do it. There's this bizarre concept in our culture that if you're not paid it doesn't really count as work. We don't do this in nature. We wouldn't say "Look at that little unemployed squirrel, that little unemployed dolphin." We would know that every creature in its natural habitat is working with everything in its nature to be what it is. Every human being has been working their entire lives to be who they are in their natural habitat; that work is part of the nature of existence. When you can find that element of play, that's when the magic happens.

What impact has the ADA had on the working life of people with disabilities?

I wish so much that I could say the ADA has really increased the opportunities for people disabilities. I do not believe it has. I think it has made employers a little more reticent to open doors because now these people have a right to sue. The law is there to prevent discrimination but the spirit was lost. When other job developers ask if they should talk to employers about the ADA when they see signs of discrimination, I say, “No way” because I don’t think that opens doors, it closes them.

I think we have to open doors with other kinds of motivators rather than with threats. “You can’t not hire me because I have a disability.” That’s not going to open employers arms and lead them to say, “Hey, come join our team.” What’s going to open doors is skills, what a person is really good at, “He’s a kick-ass engineer.” “She’s an awesome secretary.”

In order to really respond to the needs of businesses, we need to be thinking of employment through the employers perspective. They’re not interested in good job-seekers. They’re looking for good employees.

What do you see as the major distinctions between traditional job placement and true job development?

I believe the questions we choose to ask on a daily basis shape our destiny as clearly as the skeleton shapes the body. Questions are like the lens on the camera of the mind that tell us what to focus on.

In traditional job placement, the big questions are “What’s the world out there looking for and how do we make these people look like that?” “What’s the labor market doing? What are employers telling us they need? How do we take these people and somehow place them in those positions?”

Working with people who have multiple barriers to employment, I realized that job placement has a contribution to make but it can’t be the only game in town. So I started asking different questions of the people in front of me. Rather than ask about their past experience and then seeing how that might fit with job leads coming into the office, I began asking questions like these:

- When do you know you are in your element?
- In what kind of situations do you feel like you are showing your truest colors?
- In everything you've done and learned throughout your life, what's your favorite problem to solve?"

And then we look at the world to see who has that problem and doesn't know it yet.

Job development works on a different continuum from job placement. Rather than trying to fit people into identified jobs we ask,

- What are this person's gifts and who in the world can really benefit from them?
- Where would these gifts make a profit?
- Where would these gifts save money or expand customer base in some new way?
- Where would these gifts be a natural extension of what a business already does?

That's job development because what we're doing is actually developing employment opportunities.

The idea is that the world is not yet finished being created and there is nothing more flexible or malleable than a business. The very nature of business is to constantly change, shape and position itself for greater profit and benefit. So why look at the world as if our job were just to fit people into what's already there? Why not take the view of an entrepreneur? This is when we begin to realize that we are not just job developers, but we are business developers, we are community developers.

The question is not who hires people to do what these people can do, the question is, who doesn't yet hire people to do what these people can do who should? Suppose a guy says, "I want to be a custodian." In traditional job placement, you go to the newspaper under custodial services or you call on custodial companies and ask if they have an opening. A better question would be, "Who doesn't have a custodian who should? Where would that be a natural extension?" I might go to a moving company because it seems to me a natural extension to clean the space once the furniture is removed. This is a new way for the company to make money because that service might go for \$30 or \$40 an hour on

the open market and I'm working with a guy that wants to make \$13 an hour.

This requires job developers to rid themselves of the notion that the only way to enter the world of work is to go for positions that already exist and the idea that if employers haven't done something in the past they're probably not going to do it in the future. Here is my promise. When you start looking for the opportunities that are out there, you are going to see something everywhere you go.

Another way of distinguishing job placement from job development is in how we think. Traditional job placement thinks of employment from the scarcity mentality: there's not a lot to go around and a lot of people are competing for what little there is. We've got to grab our little piece and hold onto it with everything we've got. Oh, and we're not going to let anyone else in on how we got it. This way of looking at the work world makes people think, "Too much competition, too many people applying for the same jobs, no chance for me."

I want us to move into the abundant mentality of work, which goes like this: for any given member of my community, there is more opportunity than they could possibly take full advantage of in the course of one small lifetime.

What I did not say is that there will be more advertised openings for which any person will qualify. The operative word is opportunity, and that is the focus of true job development.

Why would an employer create or carve a position for someone when there are a hundred other applicants who will take the job as-is?

It is an investment in the employee. It does take time. And my experience is that it more than pays off.

Every employer's most basic need is to recruit the best person for the job. When we take the time to actually shape and carve a job to the employee's needs, interests, and abilities there is a much better chance of getting the highest level of productivity and longevity than just taking the next person in the line-up outside the door.

The awesome thing is once they've gone through the process of investing in an employee, they are more open to going through it again. It doesn't happen everywhere, easily. That's why we have to be persistent and know that we will find partnerships with employers who are ripe for the idea.

What do we need to keep in mind in order to keep true partnerships with employers?

My partner, Richard Pimentel, when asked to define job development, said, "A job developer is a bridge connecting people, many of whom are ready, willing, and wanting to work and employers who don't believe it." I love that definition because it recognizes that we're not necessarily the missing piece in people's puzzles. People have what they need to belong to their world. What we need to do is get employers to open the doors and give people the opportunity. That is the most sacred part of the work we do.

Partnership is what opens the doors. The definition of partnership is that both parties have things the other party needs and wants. A job developer that just says thanks and moves on after knocking on the door and hearing we're not hiring has too narrow a view of the possibilities for relationship with an employer.

Much more is possible if you go in and ask the employer for what you most would like and, if that can't be right now, then follow up with a myriad of other offers of partnership. There are many possibilities. For example, "We've just started a mentor project. We're taking people in industry and matching them with job-seekers with an interest. Might you have someone in your business to work with them?" Or, "Times are tough. Wouldn't this be a perfect time to take someone on as a volunteer; we've got people that just need exposure to great workplaces and you make that list." Or, "We're taking people on tours of companies. Would you be willing to have four or five people come and learn how your business works?"

We need to open our imagination about all the ways an employer can partner with us. And, here's what's beautiful: they will learn who we are in the way that normal human relationships happen, by taking small steps. They learn about you: this person follows through; she actually answers our calls; she keeps her commit-

ments. If we build the relationships, hiring will happen. We don't have to worry about impressing the business community. Just be curious and impressed with them and relationships happen.

Stereotypes may be an obstacle, but my experience is that when an employer hires a person with a disability and finds within a very short time that the disability becomes inconsequential, the employer begins to value the person for who they are, for the skills that they have. Then just the most amazing, dramatic changes happen. Nothing is more powerful to change stereotypes than exposure to real people.

What support is important for the person who wants to work?

A lot of employment programs put all their marbles in preparing great job-seekers. They take people through a job search class and teach them how to interview and network and put together great resumes and present themselves. But employers are not interested in good job-seekers, they want good employees. And, let's face it, a lot of the people we see are never going to be great at interviews, and that's okay because they're not getting hired to be interviewed. He's going to be a machine operator. She's going to be a housekeeper. He's going to be a data entry clerk. It's the day-to-day stuff on the job that matters for job success.

As programs, we need to invest our energies differently. Rather than simply equip people to look for work, we need to pay more attention to what will make them successful once they're there, skills that make a workplace sing. Skills like: how to speak up when there's a problem; how to be a great team player; how to bring your own sense of joy to the job rather than waiting on the job to bring you joy; how to think little pieces of progress rather than perfection.

How do you support people to develop those skills?

We've developed a process of activity based placement that's supported by a comprehensive library of activities that people can use to become active partners in job development. These tools can be used in many contexts, but there is special power when a group of people support one another in the process of building hope, strengthening their courage, gaining esteem, and actually taking responsibility for their job search.

The curriculum that takes people from exploring what they want from work to going out into the world to search for a job is called *Cultivating True Livelihood*. It lays out activities that move people through the many small steps of the transition that a job search represents in their lives.

Cultivating True Livelihood: Work in the 21st Century

Course 1, The Spirit to Work: Fostering Hope and Shifting Perspective

An inspiring collection of motivational activities designed to enliven and direct the spirit of work seekers. Sections include: The Rewards of Working, Work as True Livelihood, and Fresh Perspectives.

Course 2, Knowing Thyself: Assets, Strengths and Choices Developed to engage the work seeker in a more playful spirit than traditional assessment instruments, this volume offers a gold mine of tools to help the work seeker uncover the array of skills, abilities, and other assets that they have to offer the work world. The activities offer wonderful tools for raising self-esteem, building group camaraderie, and setting goals tailored to the unique strengths of each work seeker! Sections include: Inspirations and Aspirations, Inside Your Treasure Chest, and Work Preferences.

Course 3, Personal Power: Responding to Challenges Rekindles the dampened spirits of discouraged work seekers and prepares them for the rocky terrain of the typical work search - empowers them with a positive and assertive approach to facing current and future challenges. Sections include: Building Self-Esteem, Overcoming Fear and Taking Risks, Developing Assertiveness, and Fostering Power Thinking.

Course 4, Work Search Planning: Laying the Groundwork in the New Millennium Chock full of information, tools and strategies to equip today's work seekers with the skills and attitudes necessary to make their way, not only in the short term, but into the future as they continue to cultivate their livelihoods - long after they have benefited from your services. Sections include: Changes in the World of Work, Looking at the Big Picture, Provisions for the Road, Developing a Work search Plan.

Course 5, Tools for the Journey: Proposals, Resumes and Correspondence Critical for work seekers who need to "get out of the box" in order to consider new and creative possibilities for putting their skills to work! Sections include: Creating Your Own Opportunities, Resumes reviewed, and Writing Winning Correspondence.

Course 6, Researching Options and Opportunities Turns even the most passive work seeker into an inquisitive and assertive investigator of work opportunities in their communities and beyond! Sections include: Introduction to Employment Research, Targeting Work Opportunities, and Networking and Informational Interviewing.

Course 7: Contacting Employers: Takin' it to the Streets A wellspring of ideas, tools, strategies and guidelines for initiating and maintaining communication with employers. Sections include: Employers Up Close, Telephoning employers, Street Smarts.

Course 8: Interviewing with Ease: Mastering the Art of Self-Presentation This course fosters a proactive, self-marketing approach to interviewing and equips work seekers with the qualities, attitudes and skills needed to meet employers with calm and confidence. Sections include: Introduction to Interviewing, Preparing for an Interview, and Following Up the Interview.

For more information, visit www.diversityworld.com/Denise_Bissonette/publications.htm

Can you give us a feel for the curriculum?

Okay. I'll just say a little bit about what's in two of the eight courses.

Course Number Two is one of my personal favorites. It's about knowing thyself –looking at uncovering assets and preferences and gifts. One of the pillars of my work is a perspective from Buckminster Fuller, who once said, "Everyone is a genius in the right context". Everyone, just as they are right now, has the total potential for genius; our job is to find the context in which they can shine. We're not trying to create potential in people. What we're doing is creating context for the gifts they already have.

Many people come to us saying, "I'll do whatever, I'll take anything." We know that's not true, they don't want just anything. But, often people don't know what their gifts are, so, I lead them into some simple inquiries. My favorite is, "What do you love?" What we love is what we're here to give the world. What we love is what we're disciples of, what we're disciplined in. (Disciple and discipline come from the same root word.) And you know what's so beautiful? People know what they love. People know what they care about. They don't have to have worked before. They don't have to have a degree.

Instead of using direct questions, I use a variety of prompts like these:

- I know I'm in my element when...
- In the same way the bird knows it must fly, I know that I am here to...
- If I were to receive some kind of award, it would probably have to be for my...

- I'm always happy when...
- In the same way, you better not interrupt Michelangelo when he's sculpting, you better not interrupt me when I am...

What I have found is that people respond to different language. Ask, "What are your top ten skills?" and many people will say, "I don't have any skills." However, those same people will find their way to identifying their skills given prompts like,

- I've always had a knack for...
- My friends and my family have always told me that I am...

In Course Number Three I take on the topic of barriers. We love talking about gifts and dreams and motivation, but we don't often have a real conversation about the fear that going to work brings up. I think fear has gotten a really bad rap in our culture. We don't want to talk about it. We don't want to smell it. We don't want to name it. But, to me, fear is a kind of intelligence. It's a map that tells you where you've been, where you never want to go again. This is important information, but we've learned from when we were like five or six years old to just fold that map up and put it deep in our pockets and walk around like we're not afraid of anything. But when we ignore our fear, it grows. It's important to have a place where can take out your map and say, "Okay, I want to show you what's totally freaking me out about this whole situation." When you name it and you frame it, you can bring it under control.

Where people acknowledge fear they can find courage and really gain self-esteem by noticing all the ways in their life that they have shown up and responded to fearful circumstances in ways that recovered their dignity or their health. What I'm talking about is getting to the person's spirit. And, trust me, I have taken a lot of flack through the years. Some people say, "Oh, Denise, we can't be worrying about spirit. We're working with people with real problems: drug addiction, homelessness, profound disability. We don't have time for this spirit stuff." And, my question is, "Where else would you start?"

We've all had circumstances in our life that landed us on the ground. And, one way or another, we picked ourselves up, partly

because perhaps, we had resources or training or support. But, I think it was the element of our spirit, knowing we're bigger than the circumstances, that got us back on our feet. I want to remind people of all the ways they've been strong their entire lives because courage doesn't come from some vision of what we can someday be, it is based in who we have been. So its not just talking about disability or barriers on the surface, but digging for the story within the story by asking questions like these about frightening times.

- How has this made you strong?
- What have you learned through this?
- What has this brought you that you never would have had without this situation?

What does it take to sustain us in this work?

I've spoken to the need to foster hope and spirit in people who are looking for work. This is a poem I wrote about taking care of our own spirits.

Rekindle the Flame

*I see how you are all looking at me -
 searching for that picture of purpose and passion
 that I was when I first took this the job.
 To tell you the truth, I haven't seen her around for a
 while myself.
 Yet, sometimes, I feel some stirring.
 Something warm and glowing,
 like a small, barely flickering fire in some corner of my
 heart.
 And I believe, if we could rekindle that flame,
 purpose, passion and possibility could be mine again!
 But it's not about having a daytimer.
 I know we have a new time management system –
 complete with the daily calendar, the priority stickers,
 and varying colored in-boxes.
 Those tools can be very helpful, I suppose.*

*But perhaps if you could remind me of the seeds we are sowing,
of the horizon we are heading for,
Rekindle that flame and I will see my time as the precious resource it is.*

*My time here will be spent in sacrament, not sacrifice.
But it's really not about having a new daytimer.*

*I hate to say it, but it's not about technology either.
I appreciate all the new tools – I've got my pager, my cell phone –*

Hey, we've just upgraded our software.

We're networked, we're happenin'!

*But perhaps if you could you remind me
how the work we're doing with these tools
is somehow holy, or even wholesome?*

*Rekindle that flame and I could play a simple blade of grass
like a fine tuned instrument.*

*With a simple yellow pad and a No.2 pencil,
I will write you a report that will drop you to your knees.*

But it's really not about the tools.

Nor is it about information.

*Not that I don't appreciate the investment
you've made in me through training.*

You know, Tactics for the Tired,

Options for the Overwhelmed,

Strategies for the Stressed,

The Five Steps to Fame and Fortune.

*Really, my bag is packed with information –
the walls of my office are lined with new training manuals.*

If only it were about information.

The truth is that I am so thirsty for wisdom.

*Perhaps if you could remind me
of the truth and testimony of my own experience,
you know, that knowing that lies beneath the note-taking.*

*Rekindle that flame and I will be teachable again.
I will drink from your learning cup like a desert weary
traveler.
But it's really not about amassing more information.
So of course you are wondering,
"How do we rekindle that barely flickering fire?"
Perhaps we could remind one another of our collective
purpose!
In a day of valuing diversity,
Could we focus less on what makes each one of us dif-
ferent
and focus a little bit more on what makes each one of
us unique!
In this day of the contingent workforce,
Could we simply notice what it is about one another's
presence
that is unrepeatable, irreplaceable, and totally worthy
of respect.
Because really, we all just want to be one twig,
one branch, in some greater bonfire.
And if all of us could use our daily work
as kindling for the fire in our individual hearts,
the collective sigh we would sound
at the end of a very long day
would resonate like song
that would make the angels weep.
Let's rekindle that flame.
Let us rekindle that flame!*



Raise Expectations

Beth Mount