

Of Open Houses, City Developments and High Roads

Reverend Linda Yates at the Maritime Conservatory May 2, 2010

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Jesus Christ, John 13:34-35.

You need empathy to do this job well. It is a tricky internal dance that ministers perform. We need enough empathy to be able to put ourselves in another person’s shoes and yet not get lost in them. Most of the time I am able to do this. I can walk with you when you are suffering or in distress of one kind or another and be compassionate, yet not overwhelmed. I realized this week, however, I may be deficient of empathy in a particular situation.

Many of you were at the Open House on Monday night, (April 26, 2010). This meeting, meant to create a space for community face to face discussion, was intensely emotional for some people. There were five information stations: St. John’s United Church, SPIRIT Place Incorporated Ministry, Saint Vincent’s Nursing Home, the Neighbourhood Liaison Group and Michael Napier and Associates Architects. There were many positive conversations and several positive neighbours. However, one woman who had been talking a lot at the neighbourhood centre strode up to me and said, “You yourself would not want to live next to a seven story building. You have to admit that.” I replied that I would not, in fact, mind. She responded with a statement that, shall we say, expressed extreme doubt about my truth telling abilities.

I went home and lay in bed open eyed for some time. It was true, I would not mind living next to that building. Did that make me weird? The sound of the traffic eventually lulled me to sleep. Carl and I live next to Highway 102. If you zoom by our house, I could stand on my back deck, throw a small rock and hit your car. People who come to our house often say things like, “Doesn’t the sound of the traffic bother you?” Carl and I usually look at each other with puzzlement because we no longer hear it. We occasionally notice it at night, when we prefer to think of it as reminiscent of ocean waves crashing on the shore. When the real estate agent showed us the house, she remarked that it would go for a good price because most people would not like the highway. We said, “Is that all that’s wrong with it? We will take it.” I have moved so much in my childhood, I have a high tolerance for different settings. Carl grew up fifty feet from the train tracks in Deer Lake. A toddler era memory of his is of being rescued from the middle of the tracks by a gentleman who gamely returned Carl to his frantically searching mother. Trains and noises associated with work around trains gave him a high tolerance as well. We really would not mind living next to a seven story building. I may have a problem with empathy in this department and may have to rely on you folks to help with that.

As we move through this redevelopment project so many of our discussions will involve thinking about where people exist on a variety of continua. As society ponders what it means to be community, some of these continua intercept with others to create tremendous disorientation and inertia. This is true with many projects happening in our city.

At the last Neighbourhood Liaison Meeting at which we planned the Open House, one member, (who wished her opposition to the open house format to be recorded in the minutes) stated often, “I have not been heard.” Indeed, this was the mantra from our most upset neighbours: “We have not been heard.” This too keeps me awake at night. We live now in an interactive media soaked world where we can not even have a hamburger at a fast food outlet in peace without being asked for our opinion on flavour, price and service. “I have not been heard” is meant to be a show stopper. It is the new sin. What does “I have not been heard” mean? It can mean many things, depending on who is speaking. It exists on a continuum.

- At the far end of the continuum, “I have not been heard” might mean that, quite literally, there has been no opportunity, forum or mechanism to speak, voice opinions or learn about “the other.”
- In the middle of the continuum, “I have not been heard” can mean “In our conversations, I know we may disagree, but I do not feel you have empathized with me.” A reciprocal obligation is the expectation that the person who feels they have not been empathized with also has a responsibility to “hear” and empathize with the person they are in conversation with.
- At the other end of the continuum of “I have not been heard” can mean “you are not *doing it my way*. If you do not *do it my way*, then it means I have not been heard.”

The intention of the Open House was to try to work with in the middle of the continuum. At the planning meeting, we contended that as a church, if the only thing we accomplished in this whole process was to create forums or community events where people can get together and discuss what might be good or beneficial for their community, then we had done a good thing, a Christ like thing.

Some of you, I know, found it difficult. You were surprised at the level of conflict. Conflict happens when you have more than two people with different ideas together in a room. On Monday night we had way more than two or three different ideas together in this room. When you are proposing a project that is as innovative, as ground breaking as this one, then of course you will have conflict and differing opinions.

The emotions and feelings around anticipated loss feel much stronger than those around anticipated gain. Emotions around loss are visceral. This differential is so cross cultural that some psychologists feel it may be a product of evolution. (A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush thinking).

More than twenty years ago, Carl and I were involved in the Waverley Pastoral Charge which consisted of three churches. A growing suburb of the city, the two small country churches of Waverley and Windsor Junction were filled to overflowing. There was no room to sit in Waverley. People were getting exceedingly cranky. It was decided to close the two churches and build a bigger, new one in Fall River. Carl was Co-Chair of the Building Committee and I was a Session member. We were young, foolish and naïve. Church leadership thought the vision of a growing United Church community and new facilities for the community use would inspire everyone. We underestimated the power of grief and anticipation of loss, particularly of the people from the non-church community. I heard the same phrases then that I heard on Monday night, “you are not from here” “you are transient” “you don’t care” “you don’t know what you are doing.” I was brought back in time to the evening of a congregational vote to close the buildings. One man stood up and spoke eloquently about how sad he was about closing the building but how excited he was by the hope of a new and growing United Church community. In response, a woman stood up and accused him of being a “transient” in the village of Waverley. I looked sheepishly at Carl, feeling badly because she must be talking about us as well as we had lived there about seven years or so. I learned shortly that this man had lived in Waverley for over thirty years! The definition of who gets to speak for the community during these times of stress becomes narrower in the minds and hearts of those who are afraid of loss and change. People can behave badly when filled with fear. I saw many things around that building project that I never thought could happen. I observed two elderly ladies whom I profoundly respected as wise and ethical steal extra ballots so as to swing the vote against closure of the churches! Ultimately, the churches were closed, a new one was built and it is now a vital community space and place of sacred worship and interaction.

We need to remember that our envisioned end point as a church community differs at the moment from those who are upset. Right now, some can only see concerns about traffic, parking and tall structures within their neighbourhood. Their concerns are important and we need to address them. Our envisioned end point is an attractive building of unique architecture that services and lifts up people who are vulnerable. Our endpoint includes the vision of a non-profit hub where the very critical work that is done by them is supported and enabled.

Fear can compel people. At the open house, I saw the comments made at the architecture feedback station. Some of them were painful to read. One said, “Architecture torture.” I felt badly for the architects and moved into pastoral care mode. After all, no one likes to be told their baby is ugly. Both Heather Bown and Michael Napier said they thought it went quite well. What about the negative, disparaging comments, I asked? Heather said that architecture is so subjective that these kinds of comments are inevitable. In fact, she said that architecture school trains you for these things by critiquing and taking apart your work on a regular basis from day one. “Wow,” I said, “And I thought preaching or politics was hard. I now have a new profession for the ‘sucks to be you category.’” She laughed. I have new respect for the work of architects and city planners. How can fruitful conversations happen around such subjective categories as colour, “old” vs. “new” and “serene” vs. “tortuous”? These exist on more continua, I think.

The difference between what happened with the building in Fall River and this redevelopment is the expectations around consultation. Very little was expected twenty years ago. I worry about onerous expectations placed upon non-profits. I predict the increasing privatization of the care of people at both ends of the age spectrum. No one would have expected the processes that we have been engaged in from a private for-profit company. Not only that, what consultations and processes are demanded of them by law, they have paid staff to address. So, nonprofits have increased expectations demanded of them by the public because they are supposed to be about “social justice” but have less capacity than for-profits because they are run on volunteer steam. Increasingly, neighbourhoods have low tolerance for day cares and seniors facilities. Gladstone originally had a plan to include a daycare but had to remove it because the neighbourhood would not have tolerated it. This is why the care of both ends of the age spectrum is increasingly being privatized and moved to the edges of the city. Private corporations have staff, low expectations from the community in terms of consultation and deeper pockets. Yet, I can not believe that Canada is a place where we, as communities, completely abandon care of the vulnerable to the private sector.

At a time when communities demand extensive consultation about what happens in their communities, we are beginning to have less understanding about what collective “community” actually means. Those born before the baby boomers, the “veteran generation,” lived through the depression and the Second World War. As a demographic group, they understand that some personal inconvenience is sometimes required for the greater well being of their community. Boomers like me were the first generation to be encouraged to think about themselves as “number one.” As Boomers and the generations that follow them become more active in seeking a voice about their communities, personal sacrifice for the “greater good” of others, is an increasingly bitter pill to swallow – perhaps even an alien pill. It is that continuum of perception between inconvenience at one end and hardship at the other that complicates all of this discussion. For example, living next to a highway is an inconvenience for Carl and me. For others, it would be a real hardship. Who is right?

We need to have faith in the city processes. We need to continue to get more facts around traffic studies, shadow studies and all of those other requirements. Studies will not calm our most anxious neighbours. When people are emotional, research and facts don’t matter much. The facts are important for another reason. It allows us to have faith in the city process. We will do our part well and then trust that the building will be approved or disapproved on its own merits. We leave the decision in their competent hands and in God’s mysterious hands.

You will have to decide the criteria for whether this is a good project or not. If your criteria is that no one should be upset, angry or fearful about this project then you must stop now. The other end of that continuum says that no matter how upset, angry and fearful the community is, we will proceed. Clearly, we need to figure out a middle place on that continuum somewhere.

We are a church, though, so we do have some rules. One basic rule is that we ALWAYS take the high road. We have no control over other people's behaviour but we do have control over ours. That means that we will be gracious. We will listen to anger but not tolerate abuse. We will care and we will empathize. There are a few signs we need to look out for. When we begin to talk in language of righteousness, of good people and evil people then we have lost our way. When we begin to think of "camps" and use language like "the opposition," then we are moving on that low road which always leads to death of one kind or another. Of critical importance is vigilance against language and thoughts around "winning and losing." *Everyone* loses in a "win-lose" scenario.

You will do no thing of importance or of big change without creating conflict. It has been ever thus. Your church history is replete with it. I looked through your history book in anticipation of this sermon. Your 217 years is full of big decisions, huge changes and the inevitable accompanying strife. Yet here you are in this Maritime Conservatory on Anniversary Sunday. I decided to use a story that is not in your history book. I was visiting with Anne Jardine. Anne is ninety-six years old. She was telling me a story about her sons one day, saying something like, "Well, Linda, when I took them to Pinehill Seminary to teach the young male ministers how to talk to children, I..."

I interrupted her. "Excuse me Anne. Could you say that again? Why were you at Pinehill?"

It turns out that St. John's United Church had done something that they were told should never happen. Anne was certified as an early childhood Christian Education Teacher. In other words, Anne was an unpaid minister, an early prototype of a diaconal minister. She had agitated, along with other young mothers, to have a piece of the worship service dedicated to talking with the children in a language they could understand. I think the era she was talking about would have been Rev. Brain's time. Anne prevailed. St. John's created a "children's story/time" in their service. Anne said this was considered by those outside the church to be just sort of scandalous. When word got around, people accused St. John's of being irreverent, not respectful, and perhaps even heretical. Nothing new for you folks. Like most heresy that re-vision a people, it caught on. Word got out that St. John's as on to something innovative. The good Reverend was asked to come to Pinehill to teach this new innovation. Instead, he gave credit where credit was due and asked Anne to come to demonstrate to the young, single male seminarians how to talk with children. She took her two boys to demonstrate with. (I have heard others came with her including Marg Smith and her children. She has her own hilarious story to tell about that event). These young seminarians thus enlightened ultimately graduated and implemented children's time into their own worship services. Atlantic Canada would never be the same. Children's time in most of our United Churches is now as important, (or some would say more important), as the sermon and is just as much a fixture.

I guess this is my way of saying that your history is of one of doing new, innovative and amazing things. You have a history of new birth in the midst of change and its associated conflict. Will this project get off the ground? I don't know. However,

you are a congregation worthy of faith. I have faith that you will be gracious and you will respect the grief of our neighbours. You will have a vision and contribute to that with prayer, work and your treasure. Most of all, I have faith that you will love your neighbour. Jesus reminds us in the reading today that love is not an option. It is a commandment. How will the world outside these walls know *who* we are? By how we love them.