

Wimmera VolunteerFest

— *some thoughts on volunteering and active citizenship*

by vivian Hutchinson

vivian Hutchinson is a community activist and social entrepreneur. This paper is based on his keynote speech given at the Regional Victoria *VolunteerFest* held at the Wesley Performing Arts Centre in Horsham, Australia, on 26 July 2012.

1.

At the heart of all our work in the community sector is an individual awakening of citizenship.

This is a maturation of personal identity ... a ripening sense of yourself which is not defined by what you are getting from society, or what you are entitled to. It is about how you figure out what your contribution is to the common good.

This awakening is part of the “growing up” that adults do, and keep doing throughout their lives.

The community sector is built upon this awakening. The active citizen is its most important and sustainable resource.

Perhaps the simplest way of defining the community sector is to say it’s “... *what people do to make things better*”.

The individual awakening of citizenship is a critical element in how our communities develop — because this awakening involves figuring out just what part of *making things better* has got your name on it.

2.

If we are concerned about the level of dis-engagement in our communities right now ... then we need to concede that this is not an issue that is entirely about the state of our economy.

It’s more about the state of our *culture*, because the levels of dis-engagement in civic affairs have been slowly growing over the last thirty years or more.

Part of the problem is that our communities have become so colonised by consumer society that we have reduced our shared sense of *citizenship* until it is understood mainly in consumer terms.



Citizenship has become replaced by seeing ourselves as customers in a political process. It has become redefined as some sort of shopping experience that we get to practice every three years at a polling booth.

This is a reduction of our humanity, and it is a *cultural* loss ... because this strips away our ability to speak authentically to each other about the craft of working together for the common good.



I love this picture from Annie Leonard, the woman who produced the internet activist campaign called *The Story of Stuff*. It is suggesting that in our culture today we have over-developed our “consumer” muscle, while allowing our “citizen” muscle to weaken and wither.

Now I’m not suggesting that we reject consumer society and do the hippie back-to-the-land thing ... but I do believe we have to get our muscles back into balance.

We achieve this by pushing out the boundaries of our current shared understanding of *citizenship*. And when we do this, we will also push out the boundaries and restraints of all our activities *to make things better* within our communities.

This is because when we awaken and fully realise our sense of citizenship, we get to remember our own responsibilities, as well as our own particular gifts and creativity.

We remember that active citizens are the real creators of the communities we wish to live in.

We recognise that active citizens are the stewards of the things that need to be cared for.

And we understand that active citizens are also the producers of the possibilities that our children will inherit.

3.

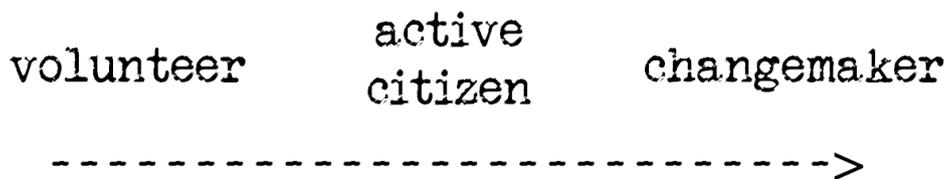
In parts of this conference you will hear the term “volunteering” framed in the context of people who have time on their hands, or as engagement strategies for young people, or migrants, or the unemployed, or as participation strategies that have good health benefits.

I’m here to suggest a different framing ... and this is one that sees volunteering as the first step in a fuller journey of occupying our *citizenship*.

In this context, the volunteer is not just free labour for someone else’s systems or programmes in social and environmental services. Instead, they are turning up to be real participants in an important process of change.

They are turning up with *all* of themselves. As well as their time and their willing hands, they are bringing their fullest senses of responsibility and creativity.

In this context, the volunteer is indeed on a journey — a journey towards embracing a more active sense of their citizenship, and eventually emerging as practical changemakers on the issues that they are most passionate about.



4.

If we want to help grow more active citizenship in our communities, then we need to get a lot smarter about just what constitutes authentic *engagement*.

I’ve worked with too many community development organisations who think that engagement is just another form of “event management”.

You can tell this by the language that is used when they talk about engagement. Their events have a consumer focus, they are primarily interested in getting people to turn up and then “buy in” to the message of a particular programme.

But *engagement* is something deeper than this. It is about personally occupying a purpose with all your senses of responsibility, commitment and accountability. And when you do this, a whole different layer of creativity becomes possible.

This is important, because it is just this sort of creativity that we need right now as we try to address the most stuck social and environmental issues in our communities.

This deeper form of engagement cannot be sustainably achieved by mandate or command. It cannot be fully delivered by a successful funding application or having a rigorous job description.

This is because these personal qualities — your senses of responsibility, commitment and accountability — are best achieved when a person is freely able to offer them.

The key word here is the foundation of this conference.

It's *voluntary*. And this means "*of one's free will*".

You don't get to understand *engagement* unless you also understand the importance of *voluntary*, and how best to invite it.

The concept of *voluntary* is made up of three parts: Firstly, it is *your choice*. Secondly it is a choice that is made without constraint (... in other words, you are not being forced to do it). And thirdly, it is done without expectation of reward (... and this usually means that you are not being paid).

These principles are important building-blocks for *engagement*. And they also begin to shape a whole different *economy* through which we can do our community work.

5.

The key *economic* resource being provided by the volunteer is not your spare time, and it is not your free labour. Nor is it any personal desperation for connection or participation.

The key resource here is your *generosity*.

And the irony is that — while being generous — it is important that you do not to give away your awareness of its value. Please don't de-value it.

The importance of generosity can easily be forgotten ... especially by the bewildered yet powerful professional interests that surround most of our stuck social and environmental problems.

I believe that our communities are not going to make their way out of the current economic recession just through austerity measures and better management. We are also going to have to meet our current challenges with our *generosity*.

Generosity is the asset that a volunteer and an active citizen brings to the table of troubled times.

This may well seem counter-intuitive to a mind-set that is focusing on cut-backs and austerity, but I believe it is generosity that is a real asset here ... and not just in terms of shifting costs to unpaid people.

The generosity of volunteers builds links of connection and resilience, and a *felt sense* of community — all of which are critical assets for hard times. The challenge here is to really value these assets, and to see our generosity as something that is not just nice, but it is indeed critical.

Generosity is essential to the healing work that will need to be done in all our communities. The leadership act here is to remember that generosity is generated through invitation, not dictate. You are gardeners in a voluntary landscape. Your job is to grow the active citizenship that makes up this landscape, and to foster the community assets that emerge from this deeper engagement.

6.

All the major religious traditions have recognised the importance of *philanthropy* in creating the communities that we want to live in.

And it is worth remembering that the word *philanthropy* comes from the Greek roots which literally mean *the love of man*. The derivation of this word does not mention money at all. It is important to keep this in mind, because the concept of philanthropy in our culture has become so associated with the business of grant-making and foundations, that we often forget these deeper and more universal roots.

In the light of this original definition, we get to recognise that every volunteer is essentially a philanthropist.



In both our countries, community organisations often set themselves up as charitable trusts.

It is a curious thing that these groups have taken the name and the legal structure of “trust” ... and yet often find it very difficult to have an authentic conversation with one another about the nature of *trust*, and about that face of

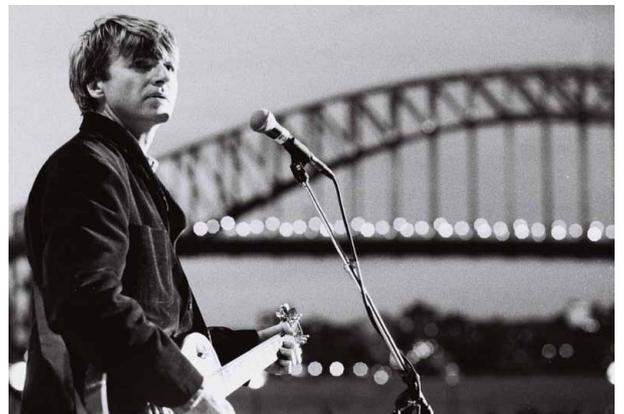
generosity which builds on that trust and is an expression of our kindness, and our love for each other and the earth.

Generosity itself has become colonised by a business world-view. And we find ourselves at trust board meetings wrapping our hearts in the language of the marketplace. We speak of “social capital”, “social auditing”, “efficiencies”, “marketing”. “fundraising”, “stakeholders” and “donor needs” ... and while doing so, our *philanthropy* is reduced to becoming the “business” of giving money away.

7.

The Kiwi musician Neil Finn (seen here playing at the Sydney Opera House) has a song that goes

*“In time you’ll see that some things
travel faster than light
In time you’ll recognise
that love is larger than life.
And praise will come to those whose kindness
leaves you without debt
and bends the shape of things
that haven’t happened yet.”*
— Neil Finn, “Faster Than Light”



The kindness-without-debt that Neil Finn sings about is something that is deeply stitched into the character of Australians and New Zealanders.

This is because we do *generosity* in a particular way. Historically, we have been

people who have struggled to break free from the British and European class systems and the mindset of charity and control that comes with it.

We have come to know that kindness-without-debt is what makes the generous difference. It is the basis of whole other economy — a *gift* economy that we recognise is at the heart of our own families and our communities.

It is very real economy within which our shared humanity starts to make sense. It is an economy that recognises that “... love is larger than life”.

This form of generosity is not a barter arrangement or a trading transaction. It's voluntary ... and as such, it presses the “pause” button on our expectations of reward, and releases the recipients from the debt of these expectations.

As a social entrepreneur, I have come to appreciate and never underestimate the importance of this other economy, and the creativity and innovation that it makes possible.

It is the acts of kindness-without-debt that are usually the first links in the chain of events that have led to many *unexpected* practical solutions that we have been searching for.

8.

When we turn up as active citizens with the sense of engagement and generosity that's needed in order to take on the biggest challenges that surround us ... then we find ourselves on the path to becoming real changemakers.

As you know, I have been part of a network of New Zealand's leading social entrepreneurs, and have profiled the work of this group in a book published this year called *How Communities Heal*. In these stories you'll hear a common theme: that one of the major jobs of a social entrepreneur — regardless of what issue they may be working on — is to awaken a deeper sense of active and engaged citizenship.

Bill Drayton, who has set up one of the leading international social entrepreneur networks (called *Ashoka*), has remarked that organising for this active citizenship is a significant structural difference between a social and a business entrepreneur.



Drayton also says that the most important contribution any of us can make right now is really not about solving any particular problem. He writes that:

"... What we must do now is increase the proportion of humans who know that they can cause change. And who, like smart white blood cells coursing through society, will stop with pleasure whenever they see that something is stuck or that an opportunity is ripe to be seized."

The numbers of people who are awakening to this deeper sense of citizenship is indeed growing ... it is just that a great deal of this emergence is happening under the radar of popular culture.

In a mainstream media landscape so addicted to oppositional, cynical or sensational journalism, the slower and more complex stories of social change — the stories of *how communities heal* — are not so readily seen or heard.

Nevertheless, the awakening is happening ... whether we are reading about it in our daily papers, or not.

9.

In 2007, the US writer and eco-entrepreneur Paul Hawken published a book called *Blessed Unrest*, which is subtitled “*How the Largest Movement in the World Has Come Into Being ... and Why No-One Saw It Coming*”.

Hawken was writing about the tens of millions of ordinary and not-so-ordinary citizens who are creating or getting involved in projects that are working ... *to make things better*.

These people are in groups which are addressing environmental issues, or confronting power in the face of social injustice, or involved in community and economic development initiatives, or leading a revival in indigenous cultures.

These groups are dispersed, and are hugely diverse. They are splintered and wonderfully dis-organised. There’s no identifiable leader, and there’s no consensus on an ideology. It’s a movement that doesn’t even really know that it’s a movement.

Yet, Hawken argues that when you put all this activity together, all these active citizens and their organisations actually represent the biggest social movement in human history.

Hawken researched previous social movements to see if there was anything equal in scale and scope, but he couldn’t find anything.

And like Drayton, Hawken also describes the emergence of all these individuals and groups as being like white blood cells in the collective body of humanity. In his book, he says they represent “... humanity’s immune response to political corruption, economic disease and environmental degradation.”

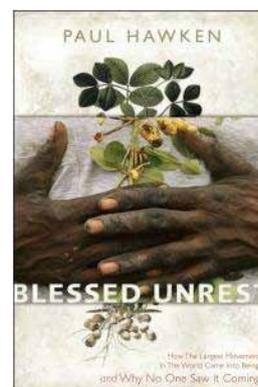
It is important to recognise that, over the past 20 years, this “immune response” throughout the world has led to the emergence of far more positively engaged active citizens and social entrepreneurs, than terrorists.

It is just that we are not as readily telling, and hearing, their stories.

10.

There’s a lot to be hopeful about here. And your choice to be a volunteer, or to work in a volunteer centre, is connected to this much wider story.

I love the quote from the American volunteer co-ordinator Marjorie Moore that has been included in the special research report launched here today. It says that:



"Volunteering is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in"

This is really the heart of the matter.

Whether you call yourself a volunteer, an active citizen, or a changemaker ... your primary job description is that of *a community-builder*.

We are all here to create the kind of communities we want to live in.

And there are two key insights that unite and drive our activities:

Whatever the problem we are trying to address ... *the answer is community*.
And whatever possibility we are trying to create ... we know that *it's going to take community*.

When we start turning up for this wider job description of building the communities we want to live in, we soon get to recognise that we are surrounded by insurmountable opportunities to make a difference.

Thank you for your own awakening and for seizing these opportunities.

And I look forward to hearing more about your projects, and to finding out more about the communities you are creating here in the Wimmera.

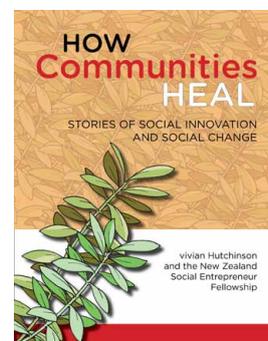


vivian Hutchinson
Horsham, Victoria
July 2012

Notes and Links

- This paper is based on a keynote speech given at the Regional Victoria *VolunteerFest* held in Horsham, Australia, on 26 July 2012.
- this paper can also be downloaded in PDF format from tinyurl.com/vivianvolunteer12
- vivian Hutchinson's keynote speech also included thoughts from a previous paper "*It's Going to Take Community*" which is available at tinyurl.com/vivianWellington12
- The *VolunteerFest* was run by the Wimmera Volunteers and the Victoria Department of Planning and Community Development. For more information see www.wimmeravolunteers.org.au
- *special thanks* to Julie Pettit and the team at Wimmera Volunteers in Horsham.
- vivian Hutchinson QSM is a community activist and social entrepreneur, and a citizen of Taranaki. He has been the co-founder and organiser of the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship, and a trustee of the Social Innovation Investment Group. He is the author of the book *How Communities Heal – stories of social innovation and social change* (2012).

Hutchinson has been one of the pioneers in community-based action for jobs in New Zealand, especially in establishing programmes for the support and education of unemployed people. He was a founder of the Taranaki Work Trust, the Skills of Enterprise Business Courses, the Jobs Research Trust, *The Jobs Letter*, and the New Zealand Mayors Taskforce for Jobs. As an adviser, Hutchinson has helped with the establishment of enterprise and economic development units at a local authority level, and the creation of government employment agencies and programmes. He is also a co-founder of the Heart Politics Gatherings, the Stewardship Learning Community, Taranaki ChangeMakers and Community Taranaki. For more information see www.vivianhutchinson.org.nz.



- *photo* of vivian Hutchinson was taken by Paul Carracher at the Wimmera *VolunteerFest* for the *Wimmera Mail-Times*.
- *Annie Leonard* ... has just released a new internet campaign called *The Story of Change*, which also focuses on the importance of an awakened citizenship in addressing our most important issues,. For more, see www.storyofstuff.org/movies-all/story-of-change/
- *Neil Finn lyric* ... is from his song "*Faster Than Light*" from his solo album "*Try Whistling This*" (1998). A live version, recorded at Abbey Road, can be heard on Neil Finn's charity CD single "*I Can See Clearly Now*" which was released to raise funds to help the sight-restoring work of the Fred Hollows Foundation. See also www.youtube.com/watch?v=niPeGafYCMl.
- *New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship* ... was founded in 2006 with funding from the Tindall Foundation and support from several other philanthropic trusts and community leaders. This learning community is now self-organised by the social entrepreneurs themselves, and is run as a social enterprise. The current trustees are Ngahau Davis (chairperson), Malcolm Cameron, Vivien Maidaborn and vivian Hutchinson. For more information see www.nzsef.org.nz
- *How Communities Heal project* ... stories of social innovation and social change featuring members of the New Zealand Social Entrepreneur Fellowship. Individual chapters from this project are available freely online at www.nzsef.org.nz/howcommunitiesheal. A hard-covered book edition can be purchased online at tinyurl.com/hchbooksales. eBook, Kindle and PDF for iPad editions are also available at tinyurl.com/hchebooks.
- *Drayton* ... see "*Everyone a Changemaker*" (2006) by Bill Drayton at tinyurl.com/draytonchangemaker and "*Tipping the World – The power of collaborative entrepreneurship*" by Bill Drayton in What Matters – McKinsey & Company website 8 April 2010 tinyurl.com/drayton2010

- *Paul Hawken ...* see “*Blessed Unrest – How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming*” by Paul Hawken (pub Viking 2007) at tinyurl.com/blessedhawken. See also Commencement Address to the Class of 2009, University of Portland 3rd May 2009, available at tinyurl.com/phawken09
- *we are not telling these stories ...* Journalist David Bornstein, and others, are creating a movement for “solutions-based” journalism amidst the mainstream media. Solutions journalism aims “... to highlight the possible solutions to the planet’s most pressing problems, rather than simply to spread news of those problems or critiques of their causes”. See tinyurl.com/3ty475m and <http://dowser.org>
- *Marjorie Moore quote on volunteering ...* was included by Julie Pettit in her Foreword to the report “*Connections, Compliance and Community – the Changing Face of Volunteering in Regional Victoria*” (July 2012) by Wimmera Volunteers and the Net Balance Foundation. This report was formally launched at the Regional Victoria *VolunteerFest* at Horsham.
- *other speeches and papers by vivian Hutchinson* relating to his work with active citizenship, social entrepreneurship and social innovation, are available on the internet at www.vivianhutchinson.org.nz
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Wimmera Volunteers and the
Department of Planning and Community
Development bring you:

Regional Victoria VolunteerFest

The VolunteerFest will feature a range
of exciting speakers, presentations and
discussion relevant to all volunteer involving
organisations.

For more information visit www.wimmeravolunteers.org.au

26th & 27th July 2012

Wesley Performing Arts Centre
Corner Roberts Ave & Urquhart St, Horsham Victoria
Thursday 26 Friday 27
10.00am - 5.00pm 9.00am - 2.00pm

- 'Its Going to Take Community' - Keynote speaker Vivian Hutchinson
- Wimmera Volunteers and NetBalance Research Presentation - 'Connections, Compliance, Communities; The new face of volunteering in Regional Victoria'
- Volunteering as a strategy for healthy ageing - Professor Jeni Warburton

Other Workshops will include:

- Engaging New Migrant Communities in Volunteering
- Changes to the Not-For-Profit Sector
- Youth Mentoring Programmes
- Build a Culture of Volunteering in Small Communities
- Role of Marketing and Social Media in Volunteering



Helping Communities Help Themselves

www.volunteer.vic.gov.au

i can do that*

