

Planning For a Good Life in an Uncertain Future

By Al Etmanski

Then, when he had flown a while longer,
something brightened toward the north,
It caught his eye, they say.
And then he flew right up against it.
He pushed his mind through
And pulled his body after.

-Skaay, Haida poet and storyteller

Even before the current global economic crisis/recession there were dark shadows over the future of Government supports for our sons, daughters and friends with disabilities.

The first is a demographic challenge. Simply put Governments are losing a big share of their tax base because baby boomers are retiring. Here is one telling statistic. In 2005 there were 44 children and seniors for every 100 Canadians of working age. By 2030 there will be 61 children and seniors for every 100 working Canadians.

The second is more competition for smaller budgets. A reduced tax base means a smaller government fiscal pie. There will be a greater requirement to fund elder care, environmental clean-up and to repay future financial debt. There may also be increased health care expenditures. You don't need to be an economist to figure out that taking more pieces out of a smaller pie could leave a much smaller slice for disability supports.

New Solutions for Changing Times

I don't list these concerns to unduly alarm anyone but to suggest we begin rethinking how to ensure the well being of all people with disabilities. Like every other sector we cannot rely on the way things are. This requires us to think and act differently.

Being different or doing things different is hard work. There aren't any formulae to rely on. There are few examples to use for inspiration. You can feel alone.

Sometimes all you have to rely on is your thinking. As the great Haida storyteller Skaay exclaims above, it is our minds which pull us through. However, thinking is strengthened by **innovation**, **resilience** and **abundance**.

Resilience Thinking:

This way of thinking assumes we are capable of solving our own problems. It assumes that when the going gets rough we rely on each other, on our own ingenuity and creativity first. It means we don't rely on external resources unless or until we have taken stock of our collective expertise, experience and assets.

Resilience thinking assumes that we as families, our sons and daughters, our neighbourhoods and communities are not passive recipients of outside support and intervention. That we have a built-in capacity to transform, adapt, heal and survive.

Resilience thinking suggests our job, and the job of funders, programs and services is to build the capacity of individuals and families to solve their own problems.

Abundance thinking:

Abundance thinking means focusing on assets and strengths rather than deficits and needs. It does not mean looking at the world through rose colored glasses. There are tough challenges out there and being Pollyannaish won't help. However, it does mean not losing sight of what we already have and making sure we know all the resources we have at our disposal. It means rediscovering the resources already present within our families and communities and to build on what we have.

For example, we can look at the financial resources available to support our sons and daughters as only coming from Government. Or we can include the discretionary trusts and RDSP's that are being set up. We can also look at our purchasing power – that is the billions individuals and their families spend every year. This power can be used to create employment for our sons and daughters and to change attitudes. When we expand our perspective we become richer than we think.

Innovation – the hallmark of families

Nature has a lot to teach us about resilience and abundance. Reducing the vulnerability of all diverse species strengthens the resilience of the eco-system as a whole. The same is true for our society. Dr. Frances Westley, a colleague of mine, has drawn important lessons from nature. She sees the involvement and engagement of our sons and daughters and other vulnerable groups as indispensable to our society's overall health.

Re-engaging vulnerable populations in our mainstream economic, social and cultural institutions, not just as recipients of services or “transfer entitlements” but as active participants and contributors is therefore intimately tied to socio-ecological resilience.

And the way to ensure this participation is by introducing, nurturing and accelerating innovation and creativity!

Well, that's a challenge we are up for. The hallmark of the disability movement is ingenuity, resilience and abundance. Families since the late 40's early 50's created something out of nothing – the majestic support system we now take for granted. And there is not a day when our sons and daughters don't display remarkable innovation and resilience just to get ready to meet the day.

A good life includes building a future with some certainty. The times and the future are most certainly going to look different than the status quo. As families, we hold the values and strengths inherent in our **innovation** of day to day tasks and visioning, our **resilience** in building relationships and ongoing advocacy, and our **abundance** to draw upon the resources around us. Even in an uncertain future, this doesn't have to be scary, just approached with eyes wide open and hands clasped in shared experience and encouragement.