

## Creativity and The Essence of True Leadership in Municipal Government

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Public servants are stewards of the civic, and custodians of civic faith. There are many labels for the work that people do in government, provincial, federal, municipal, but public service is the noblest term; the notion of a person who works for the public good in an administrative way, who mediates between governance and citizenry.

Everyone is called to the public good. We're otherwise just self-serving siphons of the state and cynics in a global mood of self-interest. Everyone could and should contribute to the public good in the building of families, communities, careers. To do otherwise is to be selfish and blind to one's destiny; and one's destiny always involves finding meaning in life by interaction, encounter and reciprocity with other people. Public service is the formal call to what we all should do, mediate the benevolence of a cosmic good in the public realm. Life is worth living, and has noble purpose and offers challenges that should guide us to a higher version of ourselves. A society must believe this and public servants must believe this; for they are the ambassadors of that faith, the expression of civic manners founded on a faith that we can achieve good things in generosity and grace in a civic environment.

I'll go so far as to say that public service is what first of all tells of a city's success or failure, a city's pettiness or vibrancy. Examine the mood of the public service and you'll find the spirit of the city, or the lack thereof. Everyone thinks political leaders and grass roots movements are markers of civic health. Change may begin at those two poles, but a city's character and soul is revealed in its civil servants; the style with which they dispense, conceive and strategize the public good. Policy may change with new administrations, change may rise from the grass roots sector, but the dialogue between leadership and citizen is in the styling hands of the public servant, and in that style we can detect the weakness, or robustness, the courage or the ineptitude, the hopefulness or despair of a city's "soul".

Furthermore good public service does not depend on great leadership. But good public service can educate naive leadership into the allegiances and loyalties that are the true resource of a great people. This means that public servants must believe in their city, their municipality, their organization, their region, their communities, independent of the fluctuations of electoral personality, independent of market moods, empathic as citizens for the needs and requirements of citizens. Sooner or later we all have to depend on public servants, whether or not they are in our department and we want to think that the public servant is a figure who believes, not in *what* they are doing, but *who* they are doing it for.

Easily said. And there are poltergeist ---fiscal constraints, budgets, double-binds in management, risk management, necessary deference to new elected officials, the problem of management arising when restructuring has been ill-conceived etc etc. Politics is a problem everywhere in life. But when politics snags public service, the damage to the public mood is extensive, and the compromises taken by those in authority are scarring, to oneself and others. The cynicism begotten of those compromises debilitates.

You know this. So what shall I add to the discussion? I'll say that the city of the future will be made or broken by the character of public service. I'll tell you that in the absence of ethical guidelines, either from institutions or political leaders, the moral character of the public servant must be its own compass. In a climate of accountability that holds everyone hostage you must champion the ethical discussion in a world where the buck is passed continually. I will tell you

that a city's spirit is broken not by crisis, economic, domestic or international, not by the fickleness of electoral promise, but by the heartless proceduralism and mindless calculation that is becoming the hallmark of systems everywhere. Yes protocol and regulation are necessary, but the citizen is more attuned than ever to beurocracy at its worst. There are many factors that aggravate the civic mood. Internet, information technology, market greed, the reduction of citizen to consumer, extended work hours, the absence of easy civic encounter, the prevalence of surveillance, the proliferation of privacy laws, the ugly design of cities, the outsourced nature of local skills---these and many other insults to the public psyche have made the citizen desperate for the human factor. Today's citizen is easily enraged at the thought of being again the victim of meaningless calculation. In a world of bylaws, caveats, prohibitions and conditions, you alone, the public servant, can make the citizen feel like a person and not a number.

It isn't creativity we need. Nor imagination. We need an "urban motive". I weary of the trumpet calls to creativity in the urban discussion. We've all been to the boardrooms of creativity talk. Generally, talk about creativity amounts to continuing what you've been doing but doing it with greater efficiency and savvy tricks for time saving and keeping the public mesmerized with catch words and appeased with good PR. At its worst, creativity ends up being the same thing as innovation. Innovation doesn't liberate anyone. It doesn't do what creativity is first of all supposed to do—make you happy in your job. Creation means you take delight in a freshly conceived idea, and feel free to rejoice in someone else's creative idea. It means you are grateful to each other for having shared ideas, and are excited by someone being excited at your ideas. But you can't freely exchange ideas if you don't have a climate of freedom and allowance. We need to feel free to create, before we can create, before we can imagine and invent wholesome strategies for the betterment of people. We need to be inspired. And you can't be inspired without relaxing into each other's appetite for truth. Truth, not agendas. And this creates trust. Without this premise you can throw the creativity discussion away. If you want real growth, real prosperity, schemes that cost less money-- you've got to have inter-civic trust and a common devotion to ideas that serve others. A city cannot be creative if it is not free to trust, to believe that the next citizen lives in good faith, and a city must be strengthened in the witness of benevolence and creativity among the stewards of the social good--- the public servants.

If I'm adding moral baggage to the responsibility of public service, so be it. And we have first of all first a responsibility to safeguard our moral visions, as citizens and as civil employees. Without this, our work cannot be well-purposed, much less creative.

Is this practical? There is nothing more practical than establishing a moral vision. Without it, all schemes get distorted. I'm not going to give you gimmicks and strats and data and smart clues. I will give you some tips taken form the art of life, which informs the art of anything, including the art of public service. I know that many of us are creative, seek to be creative, but are handcuffed by system or ideology. You can't dodge the illogic of a system indefinitely, without exhausting yourself. Your challenges may be budgetary, structural; it may be you deal with structures that have more limitation than vision, more pettiness than generosity. It may be that you are just trying to keep your job in a climate of risk-management and special interests . It may be that you are lucky and have preserved at the right time and the right place the moral enthusiasm to do your job well and better. In which case you already have a grasp of what I am about to say.

Some years ago I spoke at city hall about what it is that enfeebles the passionate imagination of a city. I listed four pitfalls that were fatal to the civic spirit and fatal in any system and destructive in the offices of any municipality or organization. These destroy the administration of the public good:

1. The notion that money predicates vision.
2. The mean-spiritedness that criticizes before it allows.

3. The conventions of safeness from either the left or the right
4. Anything that discourages human encounter in the interest of expedience and time-saving.

It will be said that these errors are most likely to take place in a bureaucracy. The truth is they can be made anywhere; on the streets, in the schools, anywhere where people give in to the temptation of taking the easy way, instead of the human way. The human way isn't just "fluff"; it's the rationale and the measure without which all strategies will become corrupt. We want to do good, but if we do not exercise these four principles in our daily work habits, we will produce at best, workable, heartless cities, places of sanitation and not sanity, places of fiscal prosperity that aren't livable.

Let me rephrase those four errors inversely as principles:

- Avoid the notion that money predicates vision
- Avoid the mean-spiritedness that criticizes before it allows
- Avoid conventions of safeness from either the left or the right
- Avoid anything that discourages human encounter in the interest of expedience and time saving.

Let's take number one. Great cities, great places happen because someone had an idea before they had the money for the idea. If the money is already there, great. But watch out that it doesn't build a habit of caution and complacency. If the civic desire for something is great, no amount of fiscal constraint will stop it in the long run. It goes contrary to the irrepressible need for people to find joy in the enterprise of living together. If the idea is beautiful enough it will find the money, and those who always talk about a small budget are generally people with a small vision. They won't easily be seduced to beautiful ideas. Such people should be avoided. They depress you and rob you of your creative zeal. Where there's more talk of budget than vision, it's a sure sign of cultural anemia.

Number two; "the mean spirited that criticizes before it allows". You find this everywhere, especially in towns and places and people who have been frustrated by personal failure or discouragement so often that they don't like to see anyone get ahead. This kind don't like to see joy, or excitement or delight grow from ideas, because it might mean taking responsibility for a change of life, a revision of ethical standards, or plain risk. These people offer the epidemic of discouragement that corrodes the public forum the office and a city's way of life.

Number 3: "The conventions of safeness from either the left or the right"---hard to know any more what's "right" or what is "left". Political correctness looked like the left once, now it looks like plain policing. The industry of accountability and the sensitivity to every request as a "right" has paralyzed the service sector. This fear has, in some cities, taken city building initiative right out of the hands of the municipal and left it in the hands of the private sector. What a waste. What a missed opportunity to collaborate with market energy and public vision. Forget about what's left or the right. They're both puritanical. And one's allegiance is to the safeguarding of the public, not to the appeasement of agendas. If you care about agendas, you're part of the corporational, not the civic.

Number 4: "Avoid what discourages human encounter in the interest of expedience and time saving". If you don't like people, go ahead and build more systems for keeping people at arm's length---more privacy considerations, more e-mail protocol, more security guards at forums about the public realm, mere intermediaries, more committees to buffer confrontation. Yes, people are unreasonable out there. Citizens are desperate for reasons that have nothing to do with your office or your department. Try to avoid the fortress mentality. And don't make the office a celebration

of schemes for expediting the unimportant. The unimportant sometimes hides a very human situation.

Sometimes office rhythms are set by people who want to get out of the office as quickly as they can. These people have lost their bearings and have asked you to follow them. Don't expect creativity in such places. Change an intolerable situation, or find a more creative place. Life is too short. Let's remember, creativity doesn't like to be rushed. It isn't about to be corralled into flow charts and productivity. Creativity is not a machine. People who want to get out of the office quickly work like machines. In such places everyone becomes a number, including the machinists.

Sometimes, people think they're job is just a job, with a fancy tag—not surprising if they let inhibitive conditions prevail, continue and don't take a risk in trying to change them. Public service is not just a job. It is a vocation. A vocation is a higher calling. A vocation is a place in citizenship, in the building of a civic ideal that rewards all individuals. A vocation does not compromise personal integrity for the sake of productivity. And productivity fails where integrity is not realized.

The four principles I've mentioned should be a paradigm for healthy operations. They are childishly simple prescripts but they are foundational to both vision and creativity. Many will rally to the good sense of these principles; but left to the daily task, we can't help but transgress their good sense.

Put simply, these four principles are exhortations to fearlessness, generosity, and basic delight in civil encounter. Fearless, generosity and delight ...they dynamize each other. If you have delight in civil encounter, and don't fence it, prohibit it, if you don't get corralled into e-mails when you could phone; if you take time, if you take pleasure and privilege in the faces behind the procedures, it refreshes one and inspires one to resist the calculating, the small minded, the numbers crunchers, those who just want to get out and go home for the day. To be refreshed by human encounter is to be inspired to take risks, to have a reason to take risks and not be badgered by political correctness or stupidity. With risk and inspiration you can then be creative. Your thoughts will come more fluidly, you will not fear interaction or collaboration, and team work will not seem like work, if all the players are impassioned by the human element. And passion is irresistible to all but the fearful. Inspiration is in seeing the faces, feeling for the stories and taking time to hear the narratives and give your own. Who has time for such things? If we don't have time, we have surrendered to real bureaucracy. If you can't take time, or are not permitted time, you have been robbed of the quality of life. And you cannot hope to improve the quality of anyone's life by service that is in the tyranny of regimen.

If I were to pick one of the four concerns that can really undermine a system I might pick the mean-spiritedness that criticizes before it allows. It corrupts all context of work. It is everywhere. Begotten of either envy, or personal failure, it is sometimes just a legacy of protocol in a city, in an office, in a company. Sometimes it afflicts whole neighborhoods. It is a "no, you can't mentality" instead of a "yes, you can" approach. It exists in a city that replaces encouragement with mere congratulation. It is the suppression of curiosity and an appetite for life. And it can be lethal in the public service.

Finally, it is just healthy to question questioning rules that don't make sense. Without a common allegiance to the truth, collaboration becomes a farce. And supporting each other in that questioning is crucial. It unifies the team or staff. It demonstrates a civic heart that services the heart of the civic at large. We are all part of that civic heart, and when we become heartless the whole civic body deteriorates.

I ask you to keep in mind that your creativity will not be unleashed without courage, generosity and zero tolerance for stupidity. It will not be released without the simple delight of knowing who you are doing things for. It will not be released if you are not free to trust, or if your constraints are ungenerously offered by fearful and small minded people. Cities are made or broken in every act of complicit subscription to the redundant and systemic. Every time a consultant replaces good sense you have hurt civic trust and your self-credibility. If you know the right thing to do, but those higher up won't allow it, and your stand may affect your budget and your way of life, you have a decision to make. And depending on that decision, you will or will not be creative. Creative doesn't mean making the best of a bad thing. It means making the best of things when all the players can intuit the truth and take delight in it.

These are considerations I offer as meditations today. The public service begins in your service to yourself, in the custody of your conscience, in the preservation of the delight that drew you to your vocation, in the acceleration of your pulse as you know you are building a community, a city a municipality, or just helping someone. Globalization is waiting to conscript you by procedure and distancing technologies. In a world that threatens to be connected without being intimate, you are the only bulwark against the impersonal. You mediate the governance to the citizen. In that mediation you must reflect the civic dream back to itself.

And now, I would like to turn your attention to the business of building livable cities, because Hamilton will soon be transformed. It is moving from being an industrial town to a centre of knowledge economies. Like Toronto it will become a creative city dependent on innovation of ideas, design and technology. Like Toronto, and most cities, it will be built by the market. Smart growth is a meaningless term. Developers and financiers will break the trail and most of us will be left to clean up the infrastructure, political, public relational and administrative. Municipalities cannot say no to development for economic reasons. I don't have to spell out for you the record of the Ontario Municipal Board and the position that Ontario cities are in regards to municipal autonomy. There are many new Canadians arriving and we do not have time to plan communities from grass roots visioning exercises; realty, property values and employment and exigencies dictate, for the most part, the matter of built form. In any event, a livable city does not depend entirely on planning and sanitation, although most people would understand it that way.

The truth is, we have relatively well planned communities all along the golden horseshoe. The truth is there is no one on the streets after 8 pm at night. You can have all the Star Bucks you want, all the pedestrian friendly neighborhoods, well landscaped, with decent transportation, lighting and surveillance cameras. You can have a well designed community, with mixed use and amenities, decent retail etc. and still have a lifeless neighborhood. You can have a neighborhood (you all know them) where the government knows more about you than your neighbor does. The job of governance, the duty of any enterprising citizen, is to build a community that thinks globally, but acts neighborly. And this requires imagination. It requires the imperative of civil encounter, in world where people spend on the average of five hours a day in front of computer screens and then go home to video games, sports screens and internet, and walk into the public realm with I-pods and move purposefully, without the risk of random encounter...we are losing curiosity about each other and we are losing the joy of co-habitation, without which urban living is just robotic. You cannot have an energized citizenry that way. Sooner or later, all cities will have the same touristic drawing cards and what will demarcate one place from another is the friendliness and conviviality of its people. Investors and tourists are attracted to vibrant places, and vibrancy is more than bistros, retail and entertainment theme parks.

You will look to the revitalization of Hamilton. Revitalization does not mean sanitizing and safety alone. It does not mean replacing the old with the new. You have a wealth of heritage buildings in Hamilton and I would exhort not to do what we have done in Toronto, replacing much historic built form with glass, chrome and steel. Gather an affection for the city that still

sings its quiet, less than glamorous, but authentic and humane past. Cherish the amiability of citizens along Barton street, John Street, Main Street... citizens that relish their neighborhoods in ways that realtors and their market cannot. Put imagination first. Give the citizens delight by streetscape, allowance and programmes that foster creativity in human encounter. Remember that a creative city, a vibrant city is one that surrenders some protocol to the wisdom and spontaneity of citizens. There is no point to a parkette if there is a sign saying "park closes at 11 pm". There is no casual encounter where there is a "no loitering" sign every twenty yards. If you want your streets to look interesting, you may have to put out a bench or design walkways so that they amble and not just lead to destinations.

Intelligent city building designs in a way that keeps people from being distracted from each other. Design that leads citizens to citizens will eventually lead to retail and economic benefit. Get your business associations to meet your artists. Invest the retailer with a sense of creativity as marketability and neighborhood character. In those areas where investors won't come because they seem unsafe and orphaned, consider the example of Niagara Falls; its downtown will be transformed, revitalized within a year because the property owners have given over empty buildings to local artists. In return, the artists are making the downtown attractive, creative, safe, and are establishing an "ethos" of Niagara Falls that will go along way in terms of tourist and purchase dollars. Revitalization in any city always begins with cultural regeneration and your local artists are your biggest resource; they, in turn, help all citizens realize their creativity and thus the town becomes "creative".

The livable city is a creative city, not a sanitized city. You will have done the citizen a favor by persuading him that there is creativity in his life and it just needed to be released, by providing a public realm that invites and does not prohibit. Consider signs of allowance as part of a budget, the elevation of the civic mood by public art, poetry on sidewalks, art installations. Above all do not dampen every civic attempt at invention by nay-saying, bylaw and safety caveat. Remember, we live in a culture of fear, and the best thing municipal governance can do is to undo that fear, if it wants a great city, a great community. The trend is towards heartless cities. Hamilton is a city with heart. Keep it that way.

You are the stewards of this civic happiness, and I wish you Godspeed in your enterprise.

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