

Let's Step Into the Intersection



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What's next for all of us is at the intersection between big and small, system and life world, institution and citizen

Thursday, November 26, 2020 -- Peter Pula

We are in a global storm of shifting sands. Big, having the uses it does, has reached the limits of its usefulness. Doing more and more of Big isn't going to get us any more significant results than it already has.

Intersections. Where we need to go... right now... is into the intersections between big and small, between institutions and citizens, and into that liminal space between the system world and the life world.

We are so far away from reaching the limits of possibility these intersections hold that those limits are not even in sight. And yet, in my sphere, I am little aware of where life teems as it could and ought in these spaces. Life is there. It struggles. Nature wants in. So, it will prevail. But why must it fight like weeds breaking through the concrete? Why, rather than fighting nature, combatting life, don't we attend and tend to it?

In Canada, David LePage and his team at [Buy Social Canada](#) are cultivating life in the intersections. The premise is simple. I'll point to municipalities because this is the sweet spot of this particular catalytic mechanism, the one David calls Social Procurement. Municipalities of all sizes spend money. And their job is to tend to the wellbeing of their communities. Social Procurement is the practice of building social outcomes into current spending. Even a small municipality could redirect millions of dollars into local and Social Enterprises (for- and not-for-profit) by simply spending what they are already spending a little bit differently and for the direct purpose of achieving social aims. Doing so would, overnight, trigger a Social Value Marketplace, a quiet [Marketplace Revolution](#) that puts social and community value creation suddenly at the centre of our daily lives and work. One wants to say, 'duh'. The mindboggling thing is that the move towards Social Procurement, in too many cases, was put on hold as a result of COVID. In the meantime, COVID-19 is *exactly* the reason to do it sooner rather than later.

Social Procurement holds the potential to move the locus of control and power to make a difference, to solve problems, to the *local* level, where decisions are best taken and best implemented. A word used in political theory for this is subsidiarity. In Canada, federal ministries have Social Procurement baked into their mandate letters. I cannot see how when it comes to Building Back Better that Social Procurement is not going to be a major force for enabling and ennobling local, more deeply democratic, egalitarian, communitarian, well, Life.

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Figuring out how to do social procurement is *the thing* to do if you are a municipality.

It's also the thing to do if you are a large anchor institution in a community. Public health authorities, school boards, corporations, banks, post-secondary institutions too. Imagine how much money, not borrowed or plucked off a magic tree, could be

flowed into local and Social Enterprises and into the hands of people who you know, whose shops you frequent, people you share the sidewalk with, the civil society organizations on whose boards you sit and for whom you volunteer. Imagine what it would do for democracy, thriving, resilience, and a better place to live, if you turned your back-office purchasing department into a leading force for the renewal and thriving of your community? Our local and Social Enterprises do not have to struggle for life. It is entirely not necessary. As a purchaser, the power to change that is completely in your hands. You simply need to shine the light and nourishment already at your disposal in their direction. So little risk. Such huge rewards.

I've been involved in conversations with corporations who imagine themselves to be changing the world. Well, until they are doing Social Procurement in the communities in which they do business, they remain members of the platitudinal class, changing little but their lingo.

I hear Joe Biden quoted as saying, "don't tell me what you value. Show me your budget and I'll tell you what you value."

Social Procurement is a pre-eminently practical, step-by-step path into the intersection, through it, and in the direction of our preferred future.

Will it be work? Yes. But it is good work. The work of cultivating life.

I've also had the delight and privilege to come to know Cormac Russell. He's been working in the intersections, in the spaces in between, as long as anyone I know. He's spent lots of time on the ground. He's penned *Rekindling Democracy*, which was the subject of this two-part podcast series. In his book, [*Rekindling Democracy*](#), Cormac provides about as much detailed thought as can be offered around working in intersections between institutions and citizens. Citizens show up in all kinds of forms. They can show up as loose affiliations, neighbourhood projects, and associations. They organize differently than institutions. That's the beauty of it. In the diversity of species, we find complexity and resilience. There is no suggestion to be made that a hospital should run like a neighbourhood association. (There is, implied, in much of mainstream discourse a suggestion that if citizen associations would simply be more organized, like an institution, that they could be taken seriously. This, is of course utter nonsense and causes active citizens no end of trouble, and often unconsciously so.) *But*, it is *absolutely necessary* that institutions

learn to interact with community members in all of their forms as soon and as well as possible.

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Why the burden on institutions? Well, fact is, if you are an institution you have power. Institutions are still where resources concentrate. Whether you like it or not, every move you make effects the lives of those in, and in contact with, your institution. Furthermore, the paradigms of community life are not prevalent enough to withstand the mere force or presence of an institutional 'personality' as it is a Big one. How do you take one step in, then two steps back, offering support and resources, as asked for and defined by those with whom you come into contact, as they step in, to usher life slowly in through the gates again? The thing is, do this not out of some vague and undiscernible aim, but in the trust that where your mandate intersects with citizen-led emergences, you too will stumble across an abundance of results and answers to problems you weren't even aware you had. Life in your institution will change for the better too. You'll have to learn development evaluation, probably, but that too would be a riotous and life-giving adventure with some direct application to how to 'do' institutional life in the next era of our history.

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Cormac is one finger pointing to that moon.

Finally, for this post, LEROs. Lived Experience Recovery Organizations. Thanks to

Stuart Green and his Recovery College colleagues in the UK, [Yvonne Hollandy](#) and I have had the good fortune of being part of hosting people who are gathering from across the UK as a movement of folks recovering together from addictions. I can't help but see that the way LEROs organize and are relating to their system partners as a light shone upon the path to our preferred future. Each LERO shapes itself locally, organically, and independently. As such they arrive at the intersection presenting a diversity of faces and characteristics. They can be messy, but they are so obviously full of life. They are in that liminal space between loose affiliation and association. They dance with the giants in mental health and addictions and social services. They are working on coming together as a movement and in order to become a voice of consequence in how people with addictions are treated, as citizens and community members, how they access services, and how they shape their lives and those around them. Check out page 15 of the November 2020 edition of [Drink and Drugs News](#) to learn more.

As an extra and beautiful touch... the fundamentals of addiction recovery are completely aligned, in my view, with the fundamentals of cultivating the good life. The western world is addicted to so many things, power, control, centralization, licence, consumerism, US politics, hierarchy... the list really is endless. Dissociation is a hidden wound cut through much of how we live in the west.

It is not lost on me that these three, what shall we call them... initiatives, efforts, agonizing longings for the world we know is possible, reach us by tendrils from the margins. And the pathways are being forged by serious people doing serious work.

The intersections... between small and Big, between the system world of governing life and the life world of cultivating it, between where we work and who we are: this is where to focus now.

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