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What's Coming Up for People as Plans for the Peterborough Dialogues Unfold

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Thursday, February 19, 2015 -- Michelle Strutzenberger

I had the privilege of joining another set of conversations with community members yesterday as plans for the Peterborough Dialogues continue to unfold.

The Peterborough Dialogues have been described as a forum for finding new ways to be active as citizens alongside existing systems. The initiative is set to launch in the next few weeks.

In preparation for that launch, two small groups were invited to help Axiom News explore further the possibilities that these dialogues might open up and how we go about bringing people together to have them.

Throughout both conversations I was continually moved, amazed and refreshed by the energy, insight and care in the room.

One of the points that surfaced several times is that something is already happening in Peterborough. It's difficult to put a finger on what exactly that is — and there can be danger in naming it too soon or trying to structure it. But elements of it can be seen in some new local food work and positive momentum around participatory budgeting options at the city council level.

It was suggested that these dialogues could give that “new something” more and different life and energy.

Everyone who joined the conversations yesterday had been part of the larger pre-

launch conversations a few weeks ago. More than one person described the experience of those conversations as a reason they felt compelled to come back.

“They had an unusual energy that doesn’t happen often enough,” said one participant. “I felt people were truly letting their guards down and talking about what really matters to them.”

Another person mentioned feeling these conversations had been “beautifully different.” This was not another experience of acting as a token community stakeholder giving a pretense of contribution to an already established agenda of an existing system.

It was suggested that the experience of the upcoming dialogues is an outcome people can anticipate — the real gem, if you will.

What is the need in this city that the Peterborough Dialogues are meant to fulfill? That was a central question in one of the group conversations.

We talked of how people yearn to be part of something larger than themselves, sharing their gifts, helping to create new possibilities, but they often don’t know where or how to start. These dialogues could be a new forum for engagement of community members.

There was also talk of the research which revealed loneliness is one of the most critical issues in our cities today. Could these dialogues offer a path for addressing that?

“Our need to belong is greater than our need for love,” one participant quoted.

For a time, we diverged into how these dialogues might change the lives of everyone in Peterborough for the better, but some insightful participants quickly highlighted how the loftiness of that goal can actually cause disengagement.

Instead we came back to focusing on what we as a group, whoever joins these dialogues, might discover by asking ourselves these questions: Who are we? What do we care about? What does this place mean to us? And how do we self-organize around the things which are meaningful to us?

I found those questions struck home for me most deeply. If the upcoming dialogues actually touch on them in a meaningful and authentic way, then I know both the dialogues and whatever outcomes they generate will be enriching and enlivening — both for me and this city I call home.

For more information, join the mailing list at peterboroughdialogues.ca. You can follow this project on Twitter at [@ptbdialogues](https://twitter.com/ptbdialogues).

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