

A Taste of the Local, Living Oasis



What are our “third spaces,” the places that give us energy in our community? That’s what one group mapped out as part of a placemaking exercise.

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Monday, April 27, 2015 -- Michelle Strutzenberger

While participating in the third session of the Peterborough Dialogues, a dialogue and media initiative Axiom News is hosting in our home town, I first had a wonderful feeling of sinking into rest, into freedom from striving — and then the thought came, “This must be what being in an oasis feels like.”

The feeling and thought showed up suddenly, springing out of a jagged mess of

other thoughts and feelings. It had been a hectic morning for me as a working mom. And even while I parried my many outer demands, I had ongoing inner work to do as a certain resistance to the dialogues kept rearing its head (a resistance that still ebbs and flows and whose roots are mystifying to me, though I'm sure some of it has to do with a half-urge to isolate and give into the fear that all this community building will disappoint in the end).

I sat down for the dialogues and saw through the large window behind the group gathered that snowflakes were making their way down from the flinty sky. In my sharp, restless state of being, the snowflakes seemed cutting and ugly — especially given it's near the end of April and a time for oozing sun and glowing flowers.

There was so much else I should be doing elsewhere, I thought and a slight feeling of dread of the rest of the session edged into my brain. Though I should have known better, images of going through hours of exhausting mental and verbal exercises thudded on my tired imagination.

And then the oasis experience began. The first moment I felt it was when I curled up in a corner to reflect and journal. This was the first invitation of the day for the group: To take 10 minutes to reflect on the last couple of weeks, keeping a set of questions in mind intended to draw deep insight and feeling. How often are we given space in group gatherings — our workplaces, our spiritual meeting places, our volunteer association events — to reflect alone — not only invited, but encouraged, given a certain amount of time to do so?

Aah. For me, it felt like a too-tight belt on my brain had been loosened a notch. Though I ended up writing very little, what felt so good for me was receiving that validation of a need for alone and reflection space in the midst of what is supposed to be a community experience.

The whole morning after that was necklaces of jewelled moments — just the sort of delightful experience that I think make life feel more fun and fulfilling — from having deep conversations with great people about meaningful things (like who am I and why am I here) to listening to soul-nourishing poetry to creating new things together using our hands and colours and paper (namely, placemaking maps of Peterborough.)

The calling question for the Peterborough Dialogues is, “How can we create a local, living oasis in a global storm of shifting sands?”

I had always thought the idea was to meet for five weeks and come up with the answer to that question, which we would then strategically apply.

But my epiphany last Thursday was that, in some ways, the very work of creating that local, living oasis is already happening — as we’re participating in the dialogues. Thanks to the artful, thoughtful hosting of people like Peter Pula, Ben Wolfe and Jocasta Boone, we’re both experiencing and practicing ways of being “in community” that are nourishing and invigorating — just like an oasis can be for bedraggled travellers from the wilderness.

Now if we can just get some real spring flowers growing.

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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