



371 Hudson Ave. NE
P.O. Box 304
Salmon Arm, BC
V1E 4N3

somerooses@shaw.ca
(250) 838-6445

Immigrant Services

Shuswap

TALKING OUR WAY TO COMMUNITY

As a boy, my family attended church every Sunday. Every Sunday, my mother and siblings would take our place in church, while my father would join other men in a parking lot conversation until such time as the service was about to commence. I noted, however, that a few men went directly into the church, upon arrival, and never joined the other men in conversation.

These Sunday conversations would drift between talk concerning the weather, the crops, individual misfortunes and politics. The conversations were punctuated with bits of humour. Differences of opinion never became heated. The women, in the community, found opportunities for their conversation while assisting in community fund raisers, picking wild berries, and attending community gatherings.

Sometimes the conversations prompted a community effort such as helping to complete a barn or house before the onset of winter, planting or harvesting the crop of a dying or injured neighbour, sewing clothes for a family having lost everything in a house fire and the like. Most often, these conversations simply served to define the individuals, their beliefs, interests, gifts and commitment to the community. As a result, community event organizers knew when, for what purpose, and in which way they could expect an individual to assist. All communities: whether they be religious communities, school communities, workplace communities, business communities, sport communities, ethnic communities, communities of seniors, youths, or special interest groups; conduct similar conversations, for similar purposes,. Such conversations take place on city buses, in staff lunchrooms, local bars, restaurants, sports arenas, and the like. Any one individual might find his or her self part of the conversation in several communities of which they are part.

When one ventures to join others in conversation, there is a presumption of belonging. Membership gives one the right to join in whatever the group is doing. In every community there are always individuals who are uncertain of their acceptance and, therefore, never join in the conversations. In my childhood, immediately after World War II, those shunned or marginalized included German settlers, Aboriginals, Asians, and the mentally handicapped or intellectually challenged. In our small rural community, these individuals were seldom of sufficient number to form a community of their own. They were generally aware of their place and avoided being shunned by remaining inconspicuous. When obliged to attend community events, they avoided taking a central role. (The single Chinese family that operated the cafe in many prairie communities were one such example.) They never allowed themselves to stand for election to school boards or church councils, coached or participated in sports, chaired meetings or provided social entertainment. Such individuals still live amongst us today and, for the most part, continue to go unnoticed.

An individual who cannot be welcomed part of the communal conversation cannot to be part of the community. **The first and most effective means of promoting the inclusion of marginalized community members is to invite them to join in our community conversations.** We can help overcome their reticence to do so by offering to accompany them to a gathering, introducing them to others who take part of the community conversation, and by acknowledging and celebrating the ways in which they can enrich the conversation. In conversation, an individual's gift can be as simple as providing another point of view that informs other participants and, perhaps, causing them to reflect or question previously held presumptions and convictions.

As a child, I perceived conversations as an act of leisure without any innate purpose or function: the sport of idle individuals. My father worked hard all week and, I presumed the relaxed Sunday morning opportunities for friendly bantering was a cheap form of social entertainment. Not all conversation is harmless. In many instances it is the prime source of casual discrimination. (Unlike deliberate discrimination, casual discrimination is more difficult to address because the perpetrators are unaware of the discriminating nature of their behavior or comments.) Today, research into language and learning estimates that 80% of the world's work is the product of social conversation, often referred to as small talk. (With the advent of social media, this is likely to be even higher today.) **Conversation is an essential means of strengthening community connections and building communities one conversation at a time.**

Many individuals still find it difficult to attribute value to community conversation. Conversation that doesn't lead to action is seen to be "just talk." (Such talk is believed to be harmless.) Conversation is the ongoing process whereby we come to better know and understand each other and to appreciate what we share in common with others in our community, as well as the ways in which we each come to recognize and appreciate our individual uniqueness. Our need to connect with others comes second, only, to our need to connect with ourselves.

Bernie Desrosiers