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Immigrant Services
Shuswap

Shuswap Community Conversations

Conversation 5: “Opportunity and Social Connection”

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The marginalized individuals in any community, whether it be within the schoolyard or the workplace, have few, if any, social connections. As a result, they are segregated and can be easily bullied and discriminated against with fear, on the part of the perpetrators, of consequence or reprisal. These victims become the socially marginalized seeking to hide in the shadows and recesses of the community in hopes of being overlooked. These are the individuals who, for no reason of their own, in some way do not fit the accepted normal. However, given the opportunity to participate, these same individuals can provide diversity and serve to enrich the social fabric of the community. Their marginalization not only robs the community of social diversity but of all their other gifts, both conforming and nonconforming, which they have to offer.

Membership is both inclusive and exclusive in nature. While it identifies those who belong, it marks those who don't – the insider and the outsider. Membership signifies privilege. The more privileged one is the more socially connected they become. Social connection avails one of opportunities and choices. The result of an exclusive society is a social class system – a society where “every man is equal, in word only.

An inclusive community is one where every individual is invited to sit at the same table, to taste the same fruit, to experience the same freedoms, and to have the same opportunities. An inclusive society is not one that strives to make everyone the same, but rather, a society where everyone has the same opportunity to achieve their highest potential, to feel socially valued and to feel free to be whom they wish.

Social inclusion requires acknowledgement. We acknowledge others when we see them. At its simplest level, this may require a smile, a greeting, a gesture or simply making eye contact. Fundamentally, inclusion requires an invitation, stated or implied, to engage in social interaction

Talk is the most common form of social inclusion. When we address someone, we signal a willingness to enter into social conversation. Listening to what another has to say is a demonstration of respect, not just for the other's right to an opinion but to his right to be heard. Knowing we are being heard reinforces our sense of self worth and belonging. Individuals tend to become the individual others believe them to be. What others perceive us to be is reflected in the manner in which others treat us. For centuries, shunning has been a widely practiced form of social exclusion. If we wish to draw the socially marginalized back into the mainstream of our communities, we must first

invite them to join in our conversations. If we wish to change the behavior of others, we need simply change the individual's perception of who they are.

The socially marginalized are more inclined to join in the community when they are convinced they have something to provide. Recognizing another's skills and talents not only enhances their self worth but encourages individuals to share their giftedness. When an individual perceives their skills and talents are valued, they are more inclined to develop, refine and put those gifts to good use. The stronger a person's sense of self worth, the less susceptible they are to being wounded by racism, hate or discrimination.

Universal, quality, public education is the great social leveler. Public school student populations constitute a microcosm of the larger community. It is in school corridors and on school playgrounds that children first learn to navigate the barriers to social inclusion. While most children are able to do so, with minimal difficulty, there remains a necessity to remain vigilant of those few who are traumatized in the process. A leading cause of adolescent death is suicide, frequently, in response to bullying. Contemporary advances in communication, allows bullies to follow their victims into what should be the security of their own home. Ability to identify instances of bullying, before they get out of hand, provides opportunities to intercede and educate both the bully and the victim concerning the acceptable protocols of social interaction. Education schools children in the art of critical thinking that allows them to dispassionately consider the actions of themselves and others. This allows them to identify alternate and more effective ways of protecting themselves than withdrawing into a self-imposed form of solitary confinement.

Labour unions work to provide a collective voice that serves as a balance to the demands of the privileged few. Whereas wealth guarantees the privileged class opportunities and social connections, the financially challenged are too consumed with securing the essentials of life to find the time or the resources needed to develop and maintain social connections. In a market economy, opportunity is a commodity for sale to the highest bidder. By pooling their resources and speaking with one voice, unions provide a collective voice serving as a counterbalance to that of the privileged and socially well connected.

In summary, drawing out and engaging the socially marginalized requires a conscious effort to include. We do so through social engagement, through acknowledging and listening to others and by extending membership to include the socially marginalized. Public schools and labour unions are two effective ways of doing so. When we affirm the worth of an individual, we strengthen the resilience of the individual in the face of racism and hate.

["Matthew 25:40](#)

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"