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Immigrant Services Shuswap

Shuswap Community Conversations Conversation # 2: “Strength in Diversity”

November 12th, 2014

“Diversity: the art of thinking independently together” Malcolm Forbes

CONTEXT:

Canada has not always supported multiculturalism, embraced diversity or promoted individual rights. In the last decade, the Canadian government has apologized for having forced Aboriginal children to attend residential schools dedicated to kill the Indian in the child. We have apologized for the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II. We have admitted that thousands of Chinese worker lives were squandered building our railroads and the head tax imposed on Asian immigrants was both unfair and racially motivated. We regret that shiploads of European Jews were refused sanctuary and forced to turn back to almost certain death. Just now are we coming to terms with the manner in which African Canadians were treated. While Canada was primarily populated by Europeans, communities were predominantly of one cultural community. Women and First Nations were denied the right to vote or to enter bars until well into the twentieth century. Homosexual behavior was a criminal offence and the mentally ill and/or challenged, for years, were locked away and sterilized. There is plenty of shame to go around.

The monster has been wounded but not slain. There still are Canadians who believe that diversity is divisive and serves to weaken rather than strengthen communities. Many still have the conviction that some cultures (generally their own) are superior to others. While no one argues that our early settlers ought to have abandoned their European cultural and religious beliefs upon landing and adopted our First Nation’s culture and spiritualist beliefs and practices. Yet, today many people still argue that new immigrants should do just that. For them, homosexuals choose to be homosexual, North American Spiritualism is not a religion, and contemporary Canadian culture is fixed. They oppose any changes meant to accommodate our changing population. For many Canadians, diversity divides and weakens, whereas, sameness unites and strengthens. This may, but need not, be so.

MULTICULTURAL ART:

When asked to identify strength in diversity, most Canadians speak first of how multicultural cuisine, art, music, dance and the like, enriches our life experience. It is even possible that we recognize and appreciate our own cultural heritage more, when we experience it, in the context of other cultures. The multicultural experience provides us with a sense of departure followed by a sense of returning home. We come to know and appreciate better who we are when we recognize who we are not. For immigrants, appreciation of their cultural art forms by fellow Canadian provides a sense of acceptance and worth. Art is the most visible gift immigrants bring with them.

REALITY CHECK:

Perhaps the first victim of diversity is prejudice. When unable to formulate a firsthand opinion, our tendency is to accept third party stereotypes. Prejudice is, in large part, founded on stereotyping. However, when replaced by real faces, stereotypes fall away. Once we witness to the pain that victims of hate and prejudice experience, we can no longer condone it or remain complacent about it. With time, today's novel becomes tomorrow's normal. This is achieved through the natural human tendency to build relationships by ferreting out what we share with others rather than fixating on what differentiates us. Cultural diversity and stereotypes cannot cohabit. Once acknowledged and accepted by their community, individuals are enabled to openly declare and embrace the way in which they are different.

DIVERSITY OF VALUES AND BELIEFS:

A society that embraces diversity recognizes the right of individuals to live in keeping with their own set of values and beliefs. Religious scholars have found that much of the religious values and beliefs of different world religions are shared values. (The Golden Rule is found to be a basic precept of all world religions.)

COGNITIVE DIVERSITY:

There is a difference in the way individuals think and learn both between and within cultures. We all use our sensory perceptions to come to explore and come to know a new phenomena. However, we tend to each rely on one sensory perception more than another. We each respond cognitively in different ways. While some seek to find ways to adapt, others strive to overcome. While we all prefer to work with others who share our way of thinking, working groups composed of diverse cognitive approaches prove to be more creative and productive.

CREATIVE FORCE OF DIVERSITY:

The economic well being of our community is, in large part, dependent on our ability to be creative in our development of products and services. A diverse public includes diverse: perspectives, needs, experiences and ways of approaching situations. This diversity creates a tension that, in turn, gives birth to new products and services that serve a broader market and accommodate a broader and more diverse clientele. A decision from a diverse group is going to be a better quality decision incorporating different angles and different thought processes. Super teams are made up of people who have a similarity of spirit and a diversity of strengths. Our diversity makes us stronger.

MANAGING DIVERSITY:

In order to achieve the full potential of diversity, it needs to be managed. Communities and workplaces need to provide sensitivity training for their leadership, management, workers, youth and children. It is a normal tendency for people, in both the community and the workplace, to self segregate. Human resource workers must be trained in how to identify early signs of segregation and in how to deal with such developments before they become problematic. There is need for both community and workplace sensitive response training. Community and workplace response protocols must guide individuals in how to respond appropriately to protect victims from discrimination and to encourage restitution.

LIMITS TO DIVERSITY:

Immigrants come to Canada, knowing ours is a constitutional democracy governed by laws that apply equally to all Canadians. Our rights and freedoms are set out in our constitution to ensure that the rights of minorities are never compromised by the tyranny of the majority. Canada is not a cultural melting pot, but rather multicultural society that welcomes and embraces diversity within the confines of certain Canadian cultural imperatives.

Bernie Desrosiers

"If we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity." John F. Kennedy