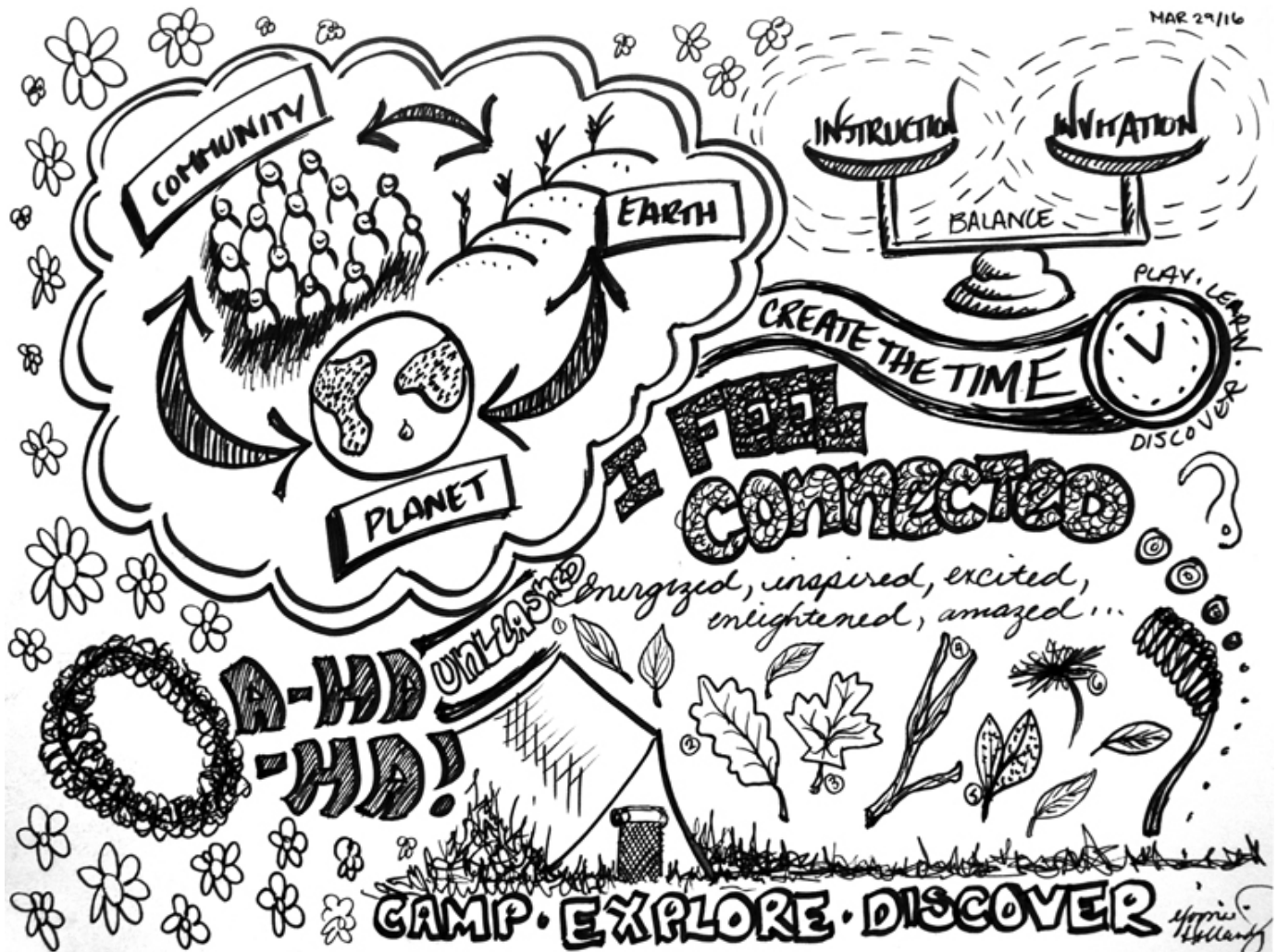


## The Act of Leadership for Our Time



(Illustration: Yvonne Hollandy)

The Act of Leadership for Our Time

Tuesday, September 13, 2016 -- Michelle Strutzenberger

They are the needed pioneers of our time, those stepping out to hold space for community dialogue that embraces authentic connection, new possibilities and

personal efficacy.

The hardships in their work are real — from encountering resistance as people grapple with this unfamiliar way of gathering to managing the wake of relational energies, good and bad, that inevitably surge as people connect meaningfully with each other.

I write as someone on the sidelines, a witness to what's occurred through the [Peterborough Dialogues](#), a community dialogue initiative of Axiom News. I've also joined a number of other community dialogues hosted by friends and acquaintances over the years.

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I recall a community dialogue hosted by author and consultant [Peter Block](#) and several others in Cincinnati several years ago. I found the connection and “seeing” of gifts and possibilities it enabled beautiful. A simmering resistance from some in the group erupted at one point. But that was also folded into the experience by Peter and his co-hosts — not ignored or plucked out. I think that’s when I first sensed the possibilities in this work — and its very real difficulties.

Among the challenges this kind of community dialogue has to hold room for, not all the time, but on occasion:

- One to a few showing up
- Resistance, even anger, in the room about how the process is unfolding
- Confusion about what exactly is happening or “supposed” to be happening
- Blaming and complaining about how the process does or does not lead to or support follow-up action.

I’ve found myself trying work through what these kinds of responses mean. Are they a sign of failure, of a need for things to improve or be changed? Possibly, in some cases, I suppose.

But I’ve also come to a place of wondering if they may be some of the clearest indications that this is real work. Of course, I’d rather hear the rapturous praise. But could the very mess, if you will, in some cases, demonstrate that this is touching more than the surface?

What’s rippled out from the Peterborough Dialogues over the past two years certainly suggests something meaningful is at work. Among the ripples:

- a change in how people/organizations are gathering, including congregations, grassroots initiatives and even a government initiative to be more focused on what people are bringing into the room and the possibilities they want to enliven
- individual transformations such as taking up new vocations and both discovering and stepping into new dreams
- the creation and spreading of new grassroots initiatives, among them a project to create pollinator gardens throughout the city
- a shift in how people see and relate to those around them — family members, neighbours and coworkers.

Physical birth features at least some pain — unless one is totally medicated. Why wouldn't the birth of transformation in the lives of individuals and in a community not also include some trouble?

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This work of hosting community dialogues that embrace authentic connection, new possibilities and personal efficacy may be some of the most important work of our time.

This is about creating the conditions for personal and community transformation to occur.

This is about building a community's resilience as people become more connected, step into their gifts and make good new things happen.

This is about reducing loneliness and isolation.

I think of all that's happened through the Peterborough Dialogues. In addition to all the tangible changes, there's a connectivity in our city that was not there before. While every drop of energy in that connection may not be positive, the connection is there. We are not as dissociated as a community as we once were. More of us know of and know and care about one another than before. And that's something.

I wouldn't be at all surprised if, heaven forbid, a crisis ever occurred in our community, we would come together more quickly than we ever have, know how to respond better than we ever have.

There may be no greater act of leadership required for our time than this — this bringing together of communities in this real, meaningful, transformative way.

I just hope there will continue to be those willing to embrace the kind of leadership required for this work. Celebrities of the usual ilk have it easy in comparison. Holding space for generative community dialogue appears to require some standing in the fray of resistance, blaming and confusion on the road to community transformation. One may not always be noticed or even thanked for one's work, especially when it comes to celebrating the transformations that have occurred. And it would appear this is not the path to amassing great fortune either.

But, wow, to be able to say one had a part in creating the conditions for meaningful life- and community- shifts to occur, that's pretty wild.