Essay

Cultivating Hope and Imagination[+]

Bliss W. Browne*
Imagine Chicago, U.S.A.

> *"Living is more than submission; it is creation. We can begin now to change this street and this city. We will begin to discover our power to transform the world."*
>
> *~ Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and social activist*

The focus on learning societies is a very timely one. Ron Heifetz, in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, suggests that leadership involves facing adaptive challenges where new learning is required. Management, by contrast, is the application of learning already in hand to address a situation in which that learning is sufficient to the challenges. At the turn of the 21st century, adaptive challenges abound: the global context of democratization and an interdependent world economy; ecological imbalances which affect the seamless web of living relationships; knowledge and information resources expanding exponentially; cultural diversity and interaction increasing in ways which require new cooperation and mutual learning.

In Chicago, the city in which I live, many people are so isolated within segregated communities and mindsets that they can't imagine themselves as meaningfully connected to others who are different. Patterns of discrimination by race, economic status and ethnicity, have become institutionalized in housing, neighborhood demographics, and political boundaries. Isolation leads to a loss of imagination about what is possible. Furthermore, there is a well acknowledged "confidence gap" with respect

[+] A longer version of this piece is available at: Jain, M and S. Jain (ed.) 2003. Unfolding Learning Societies: Experiencing the Possibilities, Vimukt Shiksha Special Issue. Udaipur, India: Shikshantar: The Peoples' Institute for Rethinking Education and Development. <http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar>.

* **Correspondence:** Imagine Chicago, 35 East Wacker Drive, Suite 1545, Chicago, IL 60601, USA.
Email: Bliss@imaginechicago.org

to institutional life. Due in part to shifts in corporate loyalty to employees, and continuing misbehavior by leaders, there is a high degree of skepticism about whether institutions will act ethically. Cynicism, which erodes hope and creativity, passes for sophistication. Apathy, addiction and violence are symptomatic of the loss of hope and the cancerous internalization of images of disorder and decay. Without confidence in a viable future, personal investment makes no sense.

How can we deal effectively with the challenges at hand? How can we create the learning environments necessary to a worthy and just future? How can we use those environments to help develop critical intergenerational and intercultural connections and empower democratic community building? How can we re-envision our economic relationships so they promote justice rather than deepen the divide between rich and poor? How can we re-imagine the work of schools so they invigorate community learning, rather than foster competition and support consumption of curricula and hierarchical social structures that do not serve the common good?

IMAGINE CHICAGO <www.imaginechicago.org>[1] has been attempting over the past ten years to engage these questions through collaborative projects that challenge individuals and institutions to understand, imagine and create the future they value. At the heart of the work has been the development of learning communities where structured exchanges of ideas, resources and experiences bring hope alive and expand what's possible to imagine and create.

We think of learning as a generative dialogue in which what we already understand is reordered and expanded by the encounter with new ideas, perspectives and experiences that open us to life and reveal and develop our own capacities. Learning changes us as we appropriate what we have learned. Ongoing dialogue with people, ideas, and our own inner teacher deepens our questions and capacity for wonder, stretching our ability to see and understand from multiple perspectives, and helping develop our talents into skills so we can make a worthwhile public contribution. Ideally, education encourages us to think critically, giving us tools to evaluate a multiplicity of approaches and disciplines that shed light on important questions. We learn to order random encounters and information into helpful categories and ideas. Increasing mastery of necessary personal and professional skills enables us to be productive. We bump into the fullness of life in ways that are disturbing and joyful, that reveal our personal and cultural limitations. Since learning involves risk taking, it happens best in a community with others who are open to the

unknown, and can help build our confidence and willingness to encounter the mystery of life without fear.

The Need for Intergenerational Learning Communities

Life is an unimaginably rich learning environment. Part of the richness of life is the dissonance provoked in us by patterns we observe that run counter to our own deeply held values and therefore move us to action. Ten years ago, I was working simultaneously as a corporate banker, Anglican priest, mother, and civic activist. These worlds shared little common vocabulary and held each other in great suspicion. I began to be increasingly unsettled by the waste of human life and the persistent injustices obvious in terms gaining public usage like "underclass" and "lost generation." Ronald Marstin, a philosopher, once defined justice as fundamentally a matter of who is included and whom we can tolerate neglecting. The prevailing social structures of our city seemed to tolerate the neglect of many, including most people of color, all of the poor, and most people under or over a certain age...in short, the most vulnerable populations. As a person of faith, I believed in the priority of an economy in which *everyone* has a place at the table, a share of what's on the table, and an opportunity to shape the common good by virtue of what they uniquely bring. What would it take for the city in which I lived and was raising our children, to learn to think of itself as a whole rather than in divided terms, to expect more from all its citizens, and give its young people, and others whose contribution had been discounted, a place to belong and a way to contribute?

I needed a learning community within which to struggle with this question. For months, I asked the question to friends and colleagues, many of whom shared helpful insights and led me to others wrestling with these issues. Hoping to think through the question in a more structured way, I organized a conference on "Faith, Imagination and Public Life," gathering in 50+ well-known city pioneers and social innovators. People introduced themselves by describing a hopeful image that had particular authority in their life - a religious symbol, the face of a beloved relative, a waterfall in the rainforest that spoke of the abundance of life. Together we worked to understand the imagination that had shaped Chicago over the last century and discussed how to stimulate a broad group of civic entrepreneurs to re-imagine the city as a whole. The highlight of the conference was an exercise in which people imagined visions of Chicago's future ultimately worthy of their commitment, and identified what would be necessary for those dreams to come to birth.

The image of a worthy future that propelled me was the recycling symbol as an image of God's economy. I was seized by a vision of a city in which nothing and no one was wasted. I imagined a city where young people and others whose visions have been discounted develop and contribute their ideas and energy. It was seeing this vision as possible that caused me to give up a sixteen year banking career to launch a new civic initiative. What, I wondered, would it take to design and create such a city?

Addressing that question has, so far for me, taken ten years and the creation of many new learning communities. My initial study consisted of reading about and listening to first hand accounts of Chicago history. One-on-one interviews followed in which I discussed with city leaders and with many local neighborhood residents what might constitute an effective visioning and economic development process in Chicago. An informal network of Chicago leaders began to gather around the questions at the heart of the inquiry. In September 1992, twenty of them - educators, corporate and media executives, philanthropists, community organizers, youth developers, economists, religious leaders, social service providers - were convened as a design team for the project which became IMAGINE CHICAGO.

A Conversation with the Future

From September 1992 to May 1993, the design team created a process of civic inquiry as the starting point for engaging the city of Chicago in a broad-based conversation about its future. Two ideas emerged from the design phase which shaped the ultimate process design: first, that the pilot should attempt to discover what gives life to the city (as opposed to focusing on problems), and second, that it should provide significant leadership opportunities for youth, who most clearly represent the city's future. It was hoped from the outset that positive intergenerational civic conversation could provide a bridge between the experience and wisdom of seasoned community builders, and the energy and commitment of youth searching for purpose, yielding deeper insights into the collective future of the community.

Two types of pilots were designed and implemented in 1993-1994: a citywide "appreciative inquiry" process to gather Chicago stories and commitments, and a series of community-based and -led processes. In each case, the intent was to give young adults and community builders in Chicago opportunities to share their hopes and commitments in a setting of mutual respect. The process was designed to use intergenerational teams,

led by a young person in the company of an adult mentor, to interview business, civic, and cultural leaders, about the future of their communities and of Chicago, using a process of appreciative inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry[2] is a form of study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight, and illuminate the life-giving forces of an organization or community's existence. It seeks out the best of what is to help ignite the collective imagination of what might be. The aim is to generate knowledge that expands the realm of the possible and helps members of the group envision a collectively desired future and successfully translate images of possibility into reality. In the case of Imagine Chicago's intergenerational interview process, the youth would both conduct the interview and distill the content for public view in ways that would help build their skills, inspire public action, and reinforce commitment. The premise was that young people could be effective agents of hope and inspiration, if they were released from the negative stereotypes in which many held themselves and were held by others.

The citywide interview process involved approximately 50 young people who interviewed about 140 Chicago citizens who were identified by members of Imagine Chicago's design team as "Chicago glue." These included artists, media executives, civic and grassroots leaders, politicians, business and professional leaders, and other young people. The interviewees represented over half of Chicago's neighborhoods.

Once the interviews had been completed, several groups of young adults distilled the data for public view. This summary was shared in three public events including a citywide "Imagination Celebration" to which all interviewers and their interviewees were invited. The room was organized into small intergenerational table groupings with interactive, arts-based activities that further developed themes coming out of the interviews. The culminating activity of the day was the completion of a large (8'x 8') Chicago dream tree. The "leaves" of the tree were drawn in advance by young interview interpreters who read several interview transcripts and inscribed on the canvas the core vision they caught from each interviewee. The "trunk" border was defined by common themes emerging from the interviews as interpreted by another group of young people who read all the interview transcripts. The categories included *inner strength, the power of commitment, common life*, and *livelihood for all.* At the end of the Imagination Celebration, each participant was invited to summarize their commitment to their expanded vision for the city by writing on a small piece of paper one thing they would do to move the city in the direction of their own vision. Those commitments were then shared and stuffed into fruit

pods sewn onto the tree canvas, becoming the seeds for spreading the ideas and vision even further.

Three community-based interview pilots followed, in which Imagine Chicago worked as a collaborator with local organizations. The young mentors from one neighborhood supported a similar process in a different community, and also facilitated a large suburban conference investigating the future of Chicago. That event changed the image that many of the adult attendees carried of "inner-city kids from tough neighborhoods" and what they were capable of accomplishing. Once the interview pilots were completed, an evaluation of the process was done, which showed three outcomes as potentially important in reconstituting a shared sense of civic community.

Shared Identity

The conversations brought people together across boundaries of age, race, experience, and geography to reflect together on their relationship to the city as a whole. The meetings were grounded in mutual respect and appreciation, and solicited positive visions and stories which people were eager to share. Participants found their Chicago citizenship provided common ground. The conversations prompted a mindset shift among many participants. Participants, who may have expected to feel separated from their conversation partners by age, culture, or background, instead experienced powerful and positive relationship connections. This, in turn, shifted their sense of possibility about their own and their community's future. They began to understand the commonalities between their visions for the city's future, and be encouraged by their respective commitments. Experiencing an "undivided Chicago conversation" seems to have nurtured hope in the possibility of sharing ownership of the city's future. The process itself modeled the hope held by many participants, and expressed by one, of "a new Chicago in which all people can (and would) participate." As another commented, "it was helpful to pull together all of our visions and create understanding for those who had not shared your experiences."

Intergenerational Partnership and Accountability

Both the young people and the adults involved commented that they gained an appreciative understanding of the other generation. As one adult shared, "Yes, I gained hope too. The thing we lived for...hopefully will be

shared by the young person and enhanced through them." A young person commented, "It has made me think about the youth and how much people care about us." The adults talked about their understanding that youth are vital partners in creating a vision of the city's future, and that youth need to be viewed as community organizing partners. In the citywide interview process, a frequent interview response to the question, "What image captures your hopes for the city's future?" was for the adult interviewee to point to the young person and say "You!" Several of these young people, ten years later, have become leaders in youth development nationally.

New Possibilities and Methods of Civic Conversation

In addition to gaining a shared hope and identity across a well-documented intergenerational divide, many participants benefited from learning the power of intergenerational appreciative inquiry. Shifting civic conversation away from problem solving to collective visioning about a shared future created energy and opened new ways of thinking. Learning to ask and answer positive questions, and to engage in active listening, was a subtle and welcome shift for many participants. A significant by-product of the process was an obvious collective ease and goodwill among all those who had participated, which was evident in the May gathering of all those who had participated in the citywide interview process. Constructive civic conversation, in a diverse group, created momentum and interest in making commitments to bring the visions to life.

It was suggested that these results were propelled by the contagious mindset of positive question/positive image/positive action imbedded in the appreciative inquiry process. It brought to the surface deeply held hopes and values, and created trustworthy connections between people who could band together to bring the hopes to fruition. An adult participant from one of the community pilots summarized the power of the process thus: " It has gotten community people, activists, youth centers, police, churches, all stirred up about something positive that can become a reality. People who have never been together have come together to do something positive...to bridge a gap between young people and adults. It has sparked energy ... It has sparked hope...We have worked together; we have collaborated, young and old. It took all of us. We know it's going to happen, because we've become one family, everyone encouraging one another. Now it's going to become a reality. This has formed respect for

our young people, that they can get an idea and bring it to life."

But the intergenerational interviews only took the first step - of understanding what was possible, and imagining where that could lead in the future. There was no structure within which to create that future. Imagine Chicago learned that the appreciative intergenerational interview process needed to be imbedded within structures that could move more readily to action.

Moving from Dialogue to Action

> *An unanswered question is a fine traveling companion. It sharpens our eye for the road.*
>
> *- Rachel Remen*

Imagine Chicago has designed its subsequent initiatives to give participants a chance to be creators in concrete and sustained ways and move from dialogue to action. Imagine Chicago has now developed over 100 learning partnerships with schools, churches, museums, community groups, and businesses. The work has involved a wide range of individuals and institutions ...grassroots leaders who want to improve their neighborhoods and learn from the innovations of other committed citizens ... public schools who want to forge deeper museum connections... teachers trying to make sense of their vocations and of education...immigrant and faith communities who want to explore the promise of democracy and American pluralism... school children and parents trying to understand and impact the systems and communities of which they are a part. Rather than putting itself at the center as a source of knowledge and expertise, Imagine Chicago creates frameworks for learning exchanges and then acts as an active listener for what is practical and possible. New possibilities emerge out of constructive dialogue in partnerships that bridge generational, cultural, racial and geographical boundaries.

Central to all the initiatives emerging in Imagine Chicago is a common approach to learning that moves from idea to action:

- *Understand* what is (focusing on the best of what is)
- *Imagine* what could be (working in partnerships with others)
- *Create* what will be (translating what we value into what we do)

Understand

All projects begin with and are grounded in asking and teaching others to ask open-ended, asset and value-oriented questions about what is

life-giving, what is working, what is generative, what is important. The focus is on asking positive questions that encourage sharing of best practices, articulation of fundamental values, and which reveal the positive foundation on which greater possibilities can be built. For example, what is something your child has accomplished that you are especially proud of? What about your family, this school, is especially effective in encouraging children to learn? What questions interest you most right now?

Imagine

New possibilities are inspired by hearing questions or stories that cause us to wonder and stretch our understanding beyond what we already know. When we are invited to articulate and hear from others what's important and is working, we readily imagine how even greater transformation and innovation can happen. In a learning community, our collective imaginations continually envisage more. Grass roots leaders discussing what they have helped change on their block inspires others to try and make a difference. Young parents sharing stories of how they are caring for their children leads others to good parenting practices. Oliver Wendell Holmes suggested long ago that "a mind once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimensions." This stretching of our imagination happens naturally. I still remember vividly a powerful image offered by an elderly interviewee in the original Imagine Chicago intergenerational interview process, who said, "I imagine a city where critical thinking is so common that politicians can never capitalize on ignorance." Hearing it started me thinking about the connections between education and democracy in a way I had not earlier considered.

Create

For imagination to help create community change, it needs to be embodied in something concrete and practical ...*a visible outcome* that inspires more people to invest themselves in making a difference. In one Imagine Chicago program, *Citizen Leaders*, grass roots leaders are invited to articulate their visions for community change and then create imaginative community development project of their own design. In the course of four months of interactive forums, they learn to recruit volunteers, design and organize a project, prepare a proposal, and implement, evaluate and sustain their projects. Learning occurs largely through sharing experiences as community change agents interact with each other within a common framework of organizing questions captured in a Community

Innovation Guide created by Imagine Chicago. Participants use this guide, which builds appreciative inquiry questioning into step-by-step worksheets to organize the project planning process. Examples of questions include: What's made you willing to invest yourself in this process? What small change on your block could make a big difference? Over the course of four months, Citizen Leaders structure their idea into a sustainable, low-cost community project, working with at least six other neighborhood volunteers. In the Citizen Leader workshops, they are active learners; in their neighborhoods, as head of a project team, they are leaders.[3]

Participants cite a number of challenges they have to overcome to become a community innovator including:

- *Sustaining a volunteer commitment*

Community development requires a substantial commitment of time and a willingness to take risks and get involved. Other priorities may intervene and preempt the involvement of the leader or of team members. Participants discover that sharing leadership makes it more possible to achieve progress.

- *Recruiting a project team*

Forming a project team is an essential, yet difficult step. Leaders are new at trying to organize their neighbors and are usually not in the habit of asking appreciative questions. Many are afraid of being rejected if they reach out. Citizen Leaders discover they can begin most easily by reaching out to those looking for a way to get involved, especially friends and those they know personally. Teams can be built from interested people on the block, family and friends of the leader, fellow church members, pastors, teachers, and other active people in the community who bring their own community connections to the project.

- *Different learning styles*

Some activities require considerable verbal, writing, and speaking skills. While some participants are comfortable with this, literacy skills are issues for others. The workshops now encourage different learning styles and forms of expression. For example, people are given the chance to meet in pairs before sharing an idea with the larger group and to creatively express their ideas through drawings or role-playing. Others more comfortable with writing record the ideas. Where writing is required, workshop presentations offer and elicit multiple concrete examples to help with comprehension and to model written responses.

Citizen Leaders: Tina Brumfeld

When I first met Tina Brumfeld, she had just finished an alternative high school and was living in public housing in Uptown in Chicago. Tina was brought to Citizen Leaders, a program Imagine Chicago was running for emerging local leaders who wanted to make a difference in their community. Someone in the business community had heard about our program and brought Tina to participate. But they lacked confidence in her ability to do so and let me know that.

Tina was very shy. She didn't open her mouth in the first three meetings. By the fourth meeting, everyone was supposed to have an idea of the project they wanted to create and who might work with them. Tina cared that there were lots of young men in the neighborhood who were unemployed and in gangs and who needed something worthwhile to do. She wanted to help but she didn't really know what to do. She knew guys liked to play basketball but the Park district said they didn't have a league because nobody was interested.

So Tina did something very simple. She put up a notice asking young men (18-24 years old) to sign up if they wanted to play basketball. She said she would help organize a team as her Citizen Leaders project. Over 200 people signed up the first week. Tina then had to get donations from local businesses...uniforms, balls, court time from park, and find referees. Suddenly she had a good kind of problem. As she recounted, "Now, I can't hardly walk down the street anymore "cause of people yelling 'Tina, Tina'... Now everybody wants to talk to me..."

By the end of the summer, there were hundreds of people playing basketball in the Uptown league. Rival gangs played together without fighting. The league led into a leadership development and job-training program for the young men. The Park district built it into their program. It inspired the starting of other leagues. Tina, who had been unemployed, got job offers from the Park district and a local high school as a community outreach worker because the project had brought out in her and made visible to so many other people her commitment and leadership skills. I remember vividly in one of the last classes of Citizen Leaders, another one of the participants listening to Tina bubbling in astonishment at all that was happening and just saying to her, "You go girl!" There was no stopping her. A year later, she was a featured interview on the Osgood files on National Public Radio. As Goethe once said, "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

Where had Tina begun? With the simple hope that she could make a difference to some young men who were friends of hers. As it turned out, she made a difference that transformed the neighborhood as well as her. She discovered gifts in herself she didn't know she had. She brought out gifts in others. Her own commitment was leveraged many times over by other people, who were inspired by her own enthusiasm and got involved themselves. Being in a learning community of other Citizen Leaders encouraged her to take the necessary risks that making a difference requires.

- *Developing achievable projects*

Frequently, as community residents begin to dream about projects to improve the community, they want to implement projects beyond the scope of the time and resources available. Participants are encouraged to dream big, yet to create an achievable project that can be implemented within a relatively short time, having their small project build the foundation for a larger one. For example, participants that want to build a community center for youth may be able to organize an after-school group or a youth arts program as a start.

• *Recreating Schools as Community Learning Centers*

Citizen Leaders has stimulated community innovation around low-cost high impact community development projects. Imagine Chicago has also developed partnerships to invigorate learning within schools. The Chicago Public Schools have 450,000 students; educational outcomes are poor and clearly correlated with poverty demographics. In 1995, Imagine Chicago, with the Center for Urban Education at DePaul University, created the Urban Imagination Network. The network linked seven Chicago public schools in very low income communities with each other, with Imagine Chicago and with six museums: a botanic garden, an aquarium, a museum of Natural History, a museum of indigenous culture, a children's museum, and an urban history museum. The central goal was to redevelop schools as centers of community learning for the benefit of students, their parents and teachers. It proved a formidable challenge.

In Chicago, many students have "checked out" of school because they are bored by passive pedagogy and a lack of connection between academic content and life issues of concern to them. They lack vocabulary and critical thinking skills to organize and express their own ideas. The primary focus for student development in the Urban Imagination Network was therefore to build reading and thinking skills by encouraging students to research content area topics, and develop exhibits that showed others what they discovered. This simple hands-on approach helps reconnect children to their own creativity, develops critical thinking skills, and increases vocabulary, knowledge, skills and self-esteem. Making their learning visible requires students to think through their ideas; the exhibits become centers for increased in school and school-community learning. In one elementary school, for example, the older children worked with the Botanic Garden to create a garden in their school courtyard, learning extensive natural science in the process. Much younger children then went into the garden, and found a plant for each color they wanted to learn. They prepared their own description linking object and color, which was compiled into a "color" book (now used for the incoming kindergarten class). In another school, each class created an illustrated quilt for the school hallway around a focused question like "How did pioneers live?" or "How does the economy work?" Now, students moving up and down the corridors see learning connections, inspired by the work of their peers.

Not all schools were equally successful in implementation. The sheer weight of bureaucratic requirements in a large standardized system dragged down people's energy and availability to participate in developing a creative learning community. We found over time that it was more produc-

tive to focus on areas within the schools where voluntary commitment rather than mandatory commitment could be leveraged. The two on which we came to focus most attention were engagement of families interested in creating a culture of learning in their homes and personal renewal of teachers.

The parent connection was an obvious one though it was not added until three years into a six year development program. Public schools tend to be quite pessimistic about the possibility of engaging parents in voluntary personal development. But educators universally agree that families have the largest impact on a student's interest in and ability to learn. So a primary component of Imagine Chicago's work with schools has been to engage public school parents in forums that bring learning alive within a broad community context.

The parent development component, called "*Reading Chicago and Bringing It Home*" focuses on core computer and "civic literacy" skills necessary to connect families (usually living in isolated low-income Chicago neighborhoods) to the life of the larger city. "Civic literacy" implies the ability to take information from any source and translate it into ideas that make sense, expand our understanding of life and enable us to act as citizens. Monthly "*Reading Chicago*" workshops, held at area museums, engage parents in researching and discussing content at the heart of a family's budget and a city's life - food, housing, energy, communication, transportation, work, financial management, water, education, recreation, public health, cultural identity, etc. Through focused reading, reflecting on life experience, visiting museum exhibits, listening to public presentations, and discussions with parents from other cultures and neighborhoods, participants think through what makes a family and city work. They develop life skills like budgeting and saving and basic reading skills essential to making sense of information from any source.

"*Bringing It Home*" monthly workshops are also held at each participating school. These concentrate on applying what parents learn in the monthly "reading a city" workshops to facilitating children's learning at home. Parents design family activities to do with their children that reinforce the key ideas and learning methodologies. Each month focuses on one core competency essential to city living (map skills, budgeting, resume writing, using public transportation, primary health care, reading a bill, computer literacy, working with people from other cultures). Parents especially skilled in a given core competency serve as coaches to other parents. Parent participation is rewarded with books and additions to a Chicago "tool kit" (atlases, public transportation maps, calculators, mu-

seum passes, tickets to cultural activities) that encourage and enable family learning and city participation.

The parent program's different elements help develop systems thinking in multiple ways. Parents learn about city systems in a location outside their neighborhood; they design activities at a local school location; they teach those creative activities to their children at home. Parents become aware of the city's complexity as a system, and of key vocabulary and practices in major systems. They build understanding of how systems change over time. For example, when parents studied transportation, they did so at the Chicago Historical Society, beginning with an exercise deciding what items they would have put in their wagon as a pioneer (an exercise in setting personal priorities). They heard first person narratives of a pioneer journey to help build a more personal connection to the artifacts in the exhibit hall on pioneer life in Illinois. They discussed why studying history matters. They thought through the relationship of refrigerated railroad transportation and farming to the development of Chicago as a stockyard and mail order center. They examined the citizen action transportation plan currently being debated in the state legislature. They begin to understand that individuals and communities both create and are shaped by the systems of which they are a part.

Participation in this civic learning community changes the consciousness of participants from being "objects" of city life, in a city which is an IT, to being " subjects" (I decide, I create, I connect, I think) within a city which is a WE. Imagine Chicago *treats* parents as subjects by respecting their intelligence and interest in learning and their commitment as involved parents and *equips* them with skills that increase their ability to act as such. By learning to read their city, parents re-envision themselves as educators, community leaders, thinkers, parents, citizens, not objects or victims. Acting as agents of change within their families, their schools and their communities engages them and reshapes their self-understanding as citizens. Re-imagining, reorganizing their relationship to the city and its systems shifts power from unresponsive bureaucratic structures to parents who act on behalf of what they value.

The program faces multiple challenges. External funders focused on school reform have been reluctant to support learning communities for parents they often view as "beyond hope," unless the links can be clearly drawn to how such support will improve performance on standardized tests by their children, or directly change the political equation within schools. As one exasperated foundation officer commented, "This program is just too interdisciplinary. You are actually trying to get people to

think. That defies our program categories!" Many potential supporters are skeptical of the possibility of even attracting parents into a learning community when so many parents are drop-outs from the educational "system." Recruitment is indeed a challenge. Most schools do not have effective technology to support ongoing communication with students' families. Most parents rarely show up on the school's premises except to collect report cards or when their child has misbehaved. Furthermore, principals who could allocate discretionary funds to parent development are reluctant to support a program that empowers parents because of the likely threat such parents can pose to school administrators who currently have little community accountability. To continue the program will require continuing to build broad financial and political support for family learning as a culture in the city open to all income levels.

Imagine Chicago's other major arena of work with public schools has been professional development of teachers. Great teachers bring energy, concern, a meaningful connection to their subject and to their students, and an openness of mind and heart that helps them be present to their students and colleagues and facilitate their learning. Currently, many teachers are overwhelmed by the cumulative stress of working in a failing system of education. They need space within which to deepen their own vision for and commitment to learning, and to gain perspective on the inevitable fears and stresses that arise within a standardized and depersonalized education system.

Imagine Chicago's teacher renewal program is structured around quarterly weekend retreats held over a two-year cycle at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Holding it in a public place gives teachers a way to revisit this "sacred ground" with their students if they choose. Content connects to seasonal themes. Large group, small group and solitary activities, involving multiple arts and outdoor experiences:

- "give teachers time" to build trust and learn to speak from their hearts rather than simply accepting conventional images of "being too busy" to attend to their own development;
- provide opportunities for teachers to articulate and explore their own experiences as teachers - and the gifts and understanding they bring to those challenges;
- offer ways for teachers to "reframe" their experience so they can understand and respond to it more deeply (not as a problem of technique but as an opportunity for personal integrity);

- help teachers develop their own language and images and methods with which to explore "spiritual development" with each other and their students; and
- reconnect teachers to natural cycles so they appreciate what supports life, and recognize that the teaching vocation offers opportunities for entering daily into a cycle of renewal and growth that is an organic and not mechanistic process.

This program differs from other professional development efforts because it is not focused on professional competence or teacher retention, though it supports both. While it involves substantial natural science content, it assumes that content alone is not sufficient to create an environment for learning. The program engages and impacts teachers' intellectual, affective and spiritual lives, challenging them to revision the purposes and practices of education, to rediscover the "heart" of teaching including their own inner strength, balance and resiliency. Engaging in arts and play fuels their innate creative capacities, and reminds them of the importance of play for their students. Developing habits of reflection and awareness helps teachers realize that silence may be as important to learning as speech. What often results is a spiritual re-awakening in which joy and love are discovered at the heart of learning.

Securing ongoing funding has again been a challenge. Funders prefer to support professional competence development in prescribed content areas, not recognizing that the chronic shortage of public school teachers will never be addressed without addressing the matter of will and interest in learning, and the priority of ongoing participation in vibrant learning communities. The Urban Imagination Network had the great advantage (but associated risk to its long-term future) of financial support from a single private foundation that acted as a partner in mission. In six years of development, schools created dynamic learning connections among teachers, students, parents, community members and museums, connections that continue to enliven teaching and influence our city. But there is not yet broad enough support for learning initiatives that go beyond school boundaries, that challenge the current culture of education as being too narrow, that thrive on collaborative inquiry around questions rather than organized dissemination of answers. So we must continue to work at all levels, connect the dots, develop much broader support for learning communities that are inclusive and participative, help people create vital connections that change what's possible.

Harnessing Hope

Imagine Chicago attracts participation because it inspires hope and offers living proof that peoples' highest aspirations are possible to translate into action. It builds competence by providing learning frameworks and networks within which ideas create community change.

Some of our practices and tools for the development of hope include:

- Offering a confident vision of human (and life) possibilities and learning
- Involving the "public" in learning communities that motivate change, make information available in an accessible way, and respectfully engage marginalized participants, including children
- Tapping into the lived experience of community members, finding ways for them to enlarge their vocabulary of how to approach the experience and participate in collaborative inquiry about it
- Asking provocative, constructive questions and listening to responses with respect, delight, confidence, commitment and relaxed high expectations
- Looking at the past as an inventory of possibilities for the future
- Encouraging the participation and leadership of multiple generations so a vision of the future is present and highly visible
- Connecting individuals, institutions and systems with common values and goals that otherwise might not be working together and can benefit each other - and sustaining the networks
- Minimizing models of control and dependence through lateral structure, encouragement of personal initiative, validation of the skills, knowledge and values each individual and organization brings
- Encouraging exploration through action research (learning via experimentation) within projects that have community impact
- Integrating artistic expression into school and community development projects so people's confidence and self understanding as creators is strengthened
- Acknowledging the importance of spirituality and the inner teacher as a primary resource for hope and learning
- Re-enchanting and expanding the language of citizenship to include civic imagination, civic literacy, education for public life
    - Deconstructing language in which people are objects in a depersonalized politics and reclaiming our creativity as subjects concerned with reconstituting a common life

  - Deconstructing the mindset of division (race, gender, class, culture) in favor of the language of inclusion (from "we/they" to "we the people")
  - Deconstructing discourse grounded in cynicism and judgment in favor of the language of hope and possibility
  - Deconstructing the culture of professionalism and isolated expertise in favor of the culture of community
- Celebrating and communicating lessons learned so the inventory of "what's possible" expands.

These tools have proven helpful in many places throughout the world, in dealing with a range of community challenges. Common to many places is the need and struggle to shift from single sector problem solving to focusing on what communities value and how to organize productive partnerships within which those values can be shared and lived. This involves helping professionals shift from an identity as competent experts with answers, rather than as community partners with questions. Community partnerships invite us to be vulnerable together, to depend upon one another, not to have all the answers ourselves. They evoke our commitment and provide us an opportunity not only to give of ourselves, but also to broaden and deepen the community to which we belong and from which we can learn. Working in partnership with uncommon partners, in a way that is natural and productive, we discover that our learning communities are much bigger than we thought.

A Concluding Reflection: Living and Learning from the Inside Out

Earlier this year, our older daughter, who is a first year university student, talked with me about how to keep from taking into herself the rather overwhelming culture of violence and despair that pervades out world. She wants to keep her heart and mind open, not to be dominated by fear, to get an education that will make a difference. In mulling over her questions over the course of several days, the phrase "inside out" lodged in my consciousness and I realized it summarized well my aspirations about learning. The best learning, and living, happens "from the inside out" for both individuals and institutions. We learn most powerfully when education begins with what's inside - with our questions, innate talents, ways of seeing rather than with preprogrammed answers by experts to someone else's questions. Our lives have integrity when decisions flow from our values and spiritual understanding not from what others expect from us.

Action is most effective when we take time to reflect before we act. We enrich public life when we are willing to create images of hope and possibility rather than consume pre-packaged media images of violence and despair.

Living from the "inside out" suggests that we must *act* to really learn, validate what we believe by experimenting with what works, taking risks, learning for ourselves. Spiritual introversion has to give way to living the values we have chosen, being accountable to the hope that is in us. We have to take who we are and get involved with what's around us, without taking on issues and responsibilities that rightly belong to others. When we operate from wholeness and hope, our lives radiate outward. They become sources of healing and inspiration to others. We learn to trust people to own their own issues and resources, to do our share but not more than our share, to encourage everyone to play their part in a way that gives life to the whole.

People find hope and inspiration by being connected to things that are bigger than they are. As meaning-making people, we need transcendent connections and a sense of purpose. Imagine Chicago helps people connect to bigger wholes that are a place from which they can learn, draw courage and recognize that their individual effort is leveraged and exalted when put together with others.

Hope alone is realistic because it perceives the scope of our real possibilities.

Hope does not strive after things that have no place but after things that have no place as yet but can acquire one. What will it take for us to believe that we can create a just economy, a global community in which no one is wasted, in which children are cared for and well educated, in which violence and addiction have lost their power to control? Are we willing to renounce cynicism and live out of a rich imagination for the flourishing of human life and community?

Hope is a choice not a feeling. We must tune ourselves into the frequency of hope by the questions we ask and the questions we live. What dreams or whispers are at the heart of your own life that may be seeking your commitment? What do you want to learn? What impresses your heart right now? What small change could you make that might make a big difference? How could you make solidarity with the stranger a daily practice? Who might stand with you? Hope, the willingness to celebrate what can be, brings with it remarkable resources for creative connections. I draw courage from being in the company of others who are committed to transforming institutions and communities through learning and who

are working to create a future worthy of our hope. Take the risk of living into your questions and commitments without needing all the answers. Actively seek the company of others willing to learn and to hold you accountable to your highest hopes. Live from the inside out. And you will discover blessing.

Notes

1. Other Imagine projects worldwide on the web:
   - Imagine UK network, at: <www.neweconomics.org>
   - Imagine Detroit (a project begun and run by one of the young people in Imagine Chicago's original intergenerational interview project): < www.nvo.com/ourgreatestgift/imaginedetroit>
   - Imagine Nagaland :<www.unicef.org>
   - Imagine Cape Town:<imaginecapetown.org.za>
   - Imagine Birmingham: <www.humancity.org>
   - Imagine London: <www.imaginelondon.org>
2. The most resources about Appreciative Inquiry are available at <appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu>.
3. A full Citizen Leaders training manual can be downloaded from Imagine Chicago's website.