

Who Cares? Creative Responses to Social Obligations – A Dialogue Series

Monograph 8: Next Steps?

January 22, 2002

*I feel as though this series has brought something home for me that I'd forgotten.
– 'Who Cares?' dialogue group member*

At the eighth and final gathering of the 'Who Cares?' dialogue group participants were asked to reflect on the last nine months and look to the future. Each dialogue group member was invited to share what the series meant personally and how it impacted their actions. This monograph summarizes these responses and the ensuing dialogue that focused on the future. In this dialogue a central question emerged: what now?

Reflections on the Series

The session began with audio clips from each of the series' six guest speakers. These clips set the tone for the reflective and thoughtful comments that followed. The reflections of participants tended to fall into two areas: comments on what was gained and the personal impact of the dialogues and comments on the overall process of the 'Who Cares?' dialogue series. From remarks all around the room it became clear that the series had had a profound effect on many and was valued by all.

Personal impact

'Enriching' was a word that flowed around the room as participants shared their reflections. Group members said they were enriched by the presentations, the dialogues and especially by others in the room. There was a sense amongst group members that they had gained a better appreciation for the depth and complexity of the issues that surrounded the series' central theme –finding creative responses for our social obligations.

A group member said the series had generated a lot of social capital amongst the group. Many participants noted strengthened connections and a sense of trust between themselves and other group members. Several have brought the concept of these dialogues to meetings outside of "Who Cares?" One member observed that while the subject matter was vast, complex and varied, there was a collective feeling that we were on common ground.

For many, the series was an affirmation of what they already knew about caring. One member described his experience in the series as a voyage of re-discovery. Another noted that almost every speaker had specifically identified a spiritual dimension in caring. This reinforced her belief in the need to incorporate this dimension into the explorations and actions related to caring. Ethics and values were other pivotal areas explored by each of the speakers, and participants found this affirming. Several participants also noted they had more confidence in seeking caring responses because they possessed a better sense of what was behind or in the background of the issues that were explored.

Group members said the series recharged and inspired them. One group member said the series had fed her intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically. For some, the inspiration came from spending time with the speakers. For others, it was time with group members who were putting principles into practice. Some participants noted they felt more hopeful. One said she felt more confident that the critical mass is there to create change. Another noted how she now had more courage to look beyond stereotypes and another described himself as more caring. Dialogue participants indicated they were excited about the potential of the social or voluntary sector. One said the best ideas for addressing the pervasive struggles of our modern day society are actually coming from this sector.

Many group members found the series challenging. One said she had been challenged to change her assumption that people have nothing to give. Another member said he learned the difference between caring and charity. The diverse perspectives of the series also challenged him to make a significant personal shift to seeing that there is a need for balance between the sectors. Another group member said he did not feel as smart, certain or clear about the answers as when the series began. A series participant noted he has realised that he works in isolation and how little is being done of what actually needs to be done.

Several group members shared their experiences in a way that highlighted the first speaker, Colin Maloney's point that it is not enough to care. Many members spoke of the challenges of trying to put their learning from the series into practice. One said it has created a dilemma for him because caring responses often run afoul of the institutional framework in which they are delivered. He has had to soul search in order to be satisfied he has done the right thing.

Collectively, participants seem to have applied the principles of the series to whatever endeavours they had been undertaking. Group members shared how their daily interactions with families and co-workers had been impacted. One dialogue participant described herself as more mindful, another said he felt like a better person as a result of the spiritual nourishment and reinforcement he received through the series. The series influenced the career decisions of some members.

Comments on the Series Design and Process

In general, there was a great deal of appreciation and admiration for the series' design. It was acknowledged that there was a risk in setting out to do something as original as 'Who Cares?' and that the series had accomplished a great deal. The public component of the series, in which the speakers spoke at larger forums in the Centre for Dialogue, was seen as a particularly strong element of the design. Media coverage of the speakers was also noted as a being a valuable contribution to the series.

There was discussion about the make up of the 'Who Cares?' dialogue group itself. While some members valued the depth and breadth of perspectives, others felt there was not enough diversity in the room. One series participant suggested that too many of the participants saw eye to eye while another stated that this was as diverse a group as he had ever seen come together around this kind of question. Another group member noted

that the dominant media provided plenty of balance to what was being discussed in the sessions. Still, some wished there had been more debate.

The dialogue group gatherings were structured in a way that provided group members with opportunities to pause and reflect. Many participants viewed the gatherings as retreats, a kind of countervail to their day to day discussions. One said he appreciated the chance to step back and really listen to the various perspectives. Other members appreciated how the exploratory nature of the dialogues allowed group members to bring their head, heart and spirit into the room. One series participant described her experience in the series as being particularly valuable because it had been participatory. This resulted in an exchange of information versus a one-way flow.

The mix and variety of speakers was acknowledged as being rich and thought provoking. Most participants appreciated the broad perspectives offered by the speakers but some felt the series was weak in terms of narrow application. Some wondered if perhaps the series had failed because the question 'Who Cares?' was not definitively answered. One participant suggested that the question itself is rhetorical, and that there is no answer to it. What was of importance was the process of trying to answer it.

This led to an exploration of a fundamental tension felt by the participants in the 'Who Cares?' dialogue series: the tension between reflection and action. A series participant suggested that the information and opportunity for reflection provided by the series was enough and that perhaps there was no need for conclusions. However, throughout the series many expressed a desire to move more quickly, beyond reflection, in order for the series to result in something concrete. Other group members noted during this final session that the participants had needed the past nine months to gel as a group and had only begun to feel ready to begin to explore extending the dialogue to action. Still others felt additional time for reflection was necessary. One participant added that he has a high tolerance for slow conclusions because the current social welfare system reflects the results of hastily implemented ideas.

These comments led naturally to the question posed to the group members for exploration in small groups: what next?

Next Steps

There was a very strong congruence as each of the five groups reported back to the whole. It was unanimously agreed that the dialogues should continue in one form or another and a series of ideas emerged to accomplish this. They included recommendations to have another dialogue series with suggested titles of 'Democracy and the Allocation of Resources' and 'Stopping the Pendulum.'

Other ideas related to disseminating and exporting ideas from the series. Possible ways to do this included replicating the series in other areas or jurisdictions. For instance, there is a group in Burnaby currently working on replicating the series with a municipal focus.

Participation with the GVRD in their Livable Region Strategy was also mentioned. Other suggestions included expanded media involvement, partnering with SFU's Philosopher's Café, doing another series using only local speakers and creating an award for social innovation. One idea was working together to tie in with the 2010 Olympic Bid. This was seen as desirable because Vancouver's bid intends to be the first in the world to be socially, environmentally and economically sustainable.

Another category of ideas for the future was related to the dialogue group itself. It was noted that trust had been built among the group and that there was enormous potential to move beyond reflection to action. Some members wanted to carry the dialogue further and suggestions were made to explore ways the group could move forward in concert. A series participant suggested it would be valuable to learn more about what group members are doing and the challenges we face. Another idea was to continue the series but focus on models and programs that are working. Values and ethics emerged as strong themes for future work together. There were also suggestions to expand the 'Who Cares?' dialogue group.

Ultimately the discussion of the future led to questions of structure. Some of the questions included: how will ideas be chosen?; how will future dialogues be funded?; and, who will participate? To date, the 'Who Cares?' steering committee has been a loose assembly of interested parties with the lion's share of the funding and organising provided by Simon Fraser University. Another series or a next phase of activity may require an expanded or revamped steering committee. In addition, other sources of funding will need to be explored. Some members of the steering group offered to investigate potential funding sources. There was a suggestion that the group and its ideas will likely need to be 'housed' or contained in some form for the next phase. A group member suggested creating a 'caring cabinet.'

As a result of this discussion a decision was made to hold a steering committee meeting on Monday, February 11, at 4 p.m. at Simon Fraser University at Harbour Centre. All interested 'Who Cares?' dialogue group members are invited to attend to begin shaping the next steps in our search for creative responses to our social obligations.