

Who Cares? Burnaby

Creative Responses to Social Obligations – A Dialogue Series

A Dialogue with Dr. Milton Wong

“What turns a hard-nosed, successful businessman into a leading philanthropist and social activist?” Three personal experiences led Dr. Milton Wong to question his understanding of the world. From Dr. Michael Smith came the knowledge that all life is related at a cellular level. Because over 90% of the DNA is common to all living things there are many more similarities than differences between humans and all living things. From Dr. Judy Payette’s description of a cloud of smoke emanating from Indonesia and spreading outward around the globe came the realization that we are “all in this together”. There is only one earth and we are all dependent on it. And from the New York National History Museum, came the understanding that since the beginning of time, there has been the same amount of matter – no more, no less. Dr. Wong said that these three lessons “blew his mind”. How could the business assumption of endless economic growth and competition over cooperation be sustainable in light of these three realities? Dr. Wong was transformed.

On May 15th, a group of Burnaby leaders gathered at Ceperly House to discuss the following questions: Who cares? Whose duty is it to care? How do we express our caring? The participants represented a broad spectrum of communities and interests. They included public leaders such as Sheila Rooney, Superintendent of the Burnaby School District, Chad Turpin, Deputy City Manager, and Mark Angelo, a renowned environmentalist from BCIT. Many were long time Burnaby residents.

The participants described Burnaby over time as they introduced themselves. They recounted swimming in Deer Lake and Still Creek and living among farms, orchards and forests. They told of raising their children and growing up in Burnaby. They told of being attracted to stable neighbourhoods where citizens look out for each other and celebrate together. They told of years of participation in, and contribution to, the arts, sports, environment, health care, police and social services. The result is a community that prides itself on its physical assets, such as its streams, lakes and parks, and cultural assets such as the Michael J. Fox Theatre, the Shadbolt Centre for the Arts, and the Burnaby Symphony Orchestra. Participants also told of pockets of poor people and new immigrants struggling to make their way. The most common thread among the stories, however, was that of dramatic and rapid change over time and continuing today.

Dr. Milton Wong, eminent entrepreneur and philanthropist, led the assembly across a terrain of business, arts and sciences. Speaking on the topic of transformative issues facing leaders and communities, he described some possible responses to the dramatic and rapid change that is occurring in our society and in the world.

The assembly talked about challenges and changes in our world. We are no longer isolated from the rest of the world. Technology has effectively shrunk our world. Germs circumnavigate the earth with ease in airplanes. Ideas and values are borderless and

permeate our world via the internet. Our understanding of relationships and shared experiences is changing. One participant spoke of his child who plays computer games on line with buddies in New York. Another participant contrasted the fear experienced by many North Americans in the past two years with the terror that has been present in the lives of women in Afghanistan for the past 25 years.

Technology has also hastened the speed of business and commerce and the pace at which change occurs. Economies, too, are global. Institutional structures, both business and civic, are changing. Dr. Wong suggested that hierarchical structures are flattening. Notions of the universality of social programs are being challenged. The role of government in the lives of the citizens is changing. The interconnectedness of all of the parts of our world – economic, social, environmental – must be considered. It is no longer possible to make plans in isolation. Politics has replaced leadership. The motivation of business and political leaders was questioned.

As the group explored how we face the challenge, at both the individual and community level, of maintaining and building the world that we want, several questions emerged:

- What is the role of businesses?
- How do we affect corporate values?
- What is government's responsibility?
- How do we influence change both locally and globally?
- How do we use technology to benefit humankind?
- How do we achieve balance in our lives?
- What is our role as citizens?

Throughout the discussion two themes emerged again and again: the role of leadership and the role of education. We need our leaders – business, civic and political – to be guided by values. We need them to articulate a vision for the future that we can identify with and participate in achieving. And we need our children to become upstanding, involved citizens both locally and in the global community.

The role of the children of today in determining the future surfaced several times. While they must grow up amidst rapid change, it is critical that their families provide them with values and confidence, and that our education system prepares them not only with knowledge and skills but also with an understanding of the contributions that they as citizens will make in shaping their communities, both locally and globally, in the future.

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The dialogue with Dr. Milton Wong was the first of three in a series of "Who Cares? Burnaby" dialogues initiated by the Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion (BACI) in conjunction with Philia. The series was co-sponsored by Burnaby Now, VanCity Savings Credit Union, and the PLAN Institute on Citizenship and Disability.