

Reclaiming Hope

(from a culture of fear)

Final Report



Original Photo: Zak Embree, Graphic Design: Dafne Blanco



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The short version

The context

Reclaiming Hope began out of a crisis. We had been planning a much larger project for our 35th anniversary year. The project was called FREEDOM and was going to be a multi media, interactive Forum Theatre production with the cast of six, and a full design team. This play was going to focus on how growing the Canadian economy had become more important than free speech, human rights and the environment. The impulse was really grounded in anti-Harperism. In October of 2015 we had to start facing the reality that we were not going to be able to raise the funds for the production. The reasons for this are many:

1. FREEDOM obviously was going to question the very foundation of the economic value system that is the underpinning of capitalism as it manifests today. There were Foundations who have been traditionally supportive of our work who were not interested in this project.
2. The FREEDOM project also suffered, though, from a lack of particular focus. In other words it had the potential to be about too many things, because there were too many issues at stake. As an example, when we explained the project to people in the scientific community, they would imagine a play about silencing scientists. When we explained the project to people specifically working with the immigrant community they would imagine a play about emerging anti-immigrant sentiments and policies. This affected our fundraising ability.
3. Over the last decade or so (under the Harper Government) the sources of funds, in particular Government funds that were accessible to us as a theatre company, have disappeared. We could previously, for instance, have gone to the Ministry of the Environment for this project as it would have focused on profit-making over environmental protection and asked questions about whether this evolution of values was healthy for the environment and therefore for Canadians. Under the Conservative Government the Ministry of the Environment stopped accepting project applications from cultural organizations. This kind of transformation has affected many government departments (Crime Prevention and Employment and Immigration to name just two) making project funding in general much more difficult.
4. As the above occurred, foundations became inundated and as an understandable reaction to the tsunami of requests, they shrunk their criteria for accepting applications. Numerous foundations with which we've had good relationships have done this. Our conversations have been about how much they appreciate the work we do and about how sorry they are that our work is now outside of their criteria, while wishing us the best for the project.

At the same time as it was becoming apparent that we were not going to raise the money we needed, the Federal election happened. While the change in government has not meant that the issues the FREEDOM project was going to be about have gone away, the texture in which things

are occurring has changed, meaning also that the public perception that the project was to happen in changed.

All of these things together led us to have to face letting go of the project in its original conception. At the very heart of this decision is a commitment that no one project is more important than the health of the company. We have never produced a project that took us into deficit. Personally, I think it's a sign of bad management. This is the second time in 35 years of production that we've had to cancel a project. Not a bad track record although both times its been traumatic. We had signed contracts with a very talented design team. All of them were very understanding of the situation and agreed with the decision knowing also that the company's work is grounded in current events which had changed dramatically. Understanding that they would not find other work at this late date we paid them a percentage of their contracts. They were very appreciative. Evidently, this does not normally happens when projects fall apart.

While sorting through what it meant to let go of the FREEDOM project and knowing we had an obligation to our operating funders to produce something, we realized we could focus into one aspect of what the large project was going to be about: That is, that for the last decade or so we have been told that we should be very afraid. Similar to the situation in many countries around the world, Canadians have been told to live in fear and to base our economic, trade and foreign policy decisions in a climate of fear.

We knew we didn't have the time nor the money to pull together a different large production that was a full play. The option that made the most sense both time and money-wise was to do a project like *Corporations in our Heads* had been, in which the entire event came from the audience each night. This would not have been my first choice as I know from experience that while audiences love this kind of process once they are AT the event, getting them TO the event is very challenging. People tend to be afraid, knowing that there is no play, no actors and no script, that they are going to be dragged onto the stage. Of course this is completely again my ethics but it's very difficult to combat the perception. Nevertheless, this option seemed to be the only way forward.

And so the **Reclaiming Hope (from a culture of fear)** project was born.

Outreach

We decided to hold the events in a different community location each night, hosted by a diverse array of community partners. The idea reflects a desire to reach deep into community, ensuring attendance by people in the constituency of the partners, while also mixing them with 'general public'. Looking at the calendar, and balancing that against my energy levels (facilitating a 2.5 to 3 hour event in which there is no play, not actors and no script takes a monumental amount of energy) we figured we could do up to 12 events over a 3 week 'window'.

David Ng, our Outreach Coordinator, leapt into the task of booking the events. His Outreach Report is available [here](#). It details his work and experience.

Here, though, is the schedule and partners:

Mar. 10 :: Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre :: 1607 E Hastings St

→ **Partners:** Aboriginal Front Door Society, Journeys Around the Circle & Native Education College

Mar. 11 + 12 :: Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House :: 800 E Broadway

→ **Partner:** Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House

Mar. 13 :: Kitsilano Neighbourhood House :: 2305 W 7th Ave

→ **Partners:** Kits House, Sierra Club BC & The Society Promoting Environmental Conservation

Mar. 15 :: SFU Woodward's Djavad Mowafaghian World Art Centre :: 149 W Hastings St

→ **Partners:** Check Your Head, Gen Why Media & SFU

Mar. 17 :: Heartwood Community Café :: 317 E Broadway

→ **Partners:** Lighthouse of Hope Christian Fellowship, Our City of Colours & Out on Screen

Mar. 18 + 19 :: Groundswell Café + Learning Space :: 566 Powell St

→ **Partner:** Groundswell Grassroots Economic Alternatives

Mar. 22 :: Unitarian Church of Vancouver :: 949 West 49th Ave

→ **Partners:** Critical Muslim Voices, Independent Jewish Voices BC & Social Justice Committee Unitarian Church of Vancouver

Mar. 23 :: UBC First Nations Longhouse, Sty-Wet-Tan Great Hall :: 1985 West Mall, UBC

→ **Partners:** UBC First Nations House of Learning & UBC Vancouver Equity and Inclusion

Apr. 1 + 2 :: Scotiabank Dance Centre, Faris Family Studio :: 677 Davie St @ Granville*

* These two days were Theatre for Living's – there were no outside partners. Because of the gap over the Easter Holidays, we decided we would organize the last two events on our own.

The 'rehearsals'

There is no way to 'rehearse' a thing like this alone in one's apartment. How to be even somewhat confident that the idea will work? How is a completely audience dependent theatre event that moves from fear to hope structured? What are the steps?

I decided to have two 'invitation only' events to try to figure out how to structure the evening, knowing that every night was going to be very different, depending on who was in the audience, but at least I'd have some experience under my belt.

We invited friends of the Company – in particular people who had taken Theatre for Living training workshops to come and help me figure this out. Both events had 20 – 25 people in attendance. We made it very clear to them what they were coming to – the events were not FOR THEM...they were FOR ME – to help me figure out what I was doing.

I knew I could structure the flow of the event off of the structure of “Corporations in our Heads” a few years ago, but “Corporations” had a much clearer through-line than Reclaiming Hope. “Corporations” looked at how the messages of Corporations have invaded our collective psyche and used the theatre to identify the messages, give them identities, and change our relationships to them. Reclaiming Hope had the same structure, but then wanted to take a further step: Having experimented with changing our relationship to voices of fear, how do we ‘reclaim hope’ from this? In the rehearsals I had to confront what a good but fuzzy idea this was.

I don’t think this was particularly successful on the first rehearsal. We really got stuck, I think, in dealing with fear. I had trouble taking the next step in my own head – finding the right bridges...questions to ask. Also knowing how to set up the event – the right series of activities to plot out the journey of the evening. Every theatre event has an action narrative – even ones, I’ve discovered, where there is no play. Its impossible to know in advance what the *content* or *exact actions* will be, but one can plot out an ‘open’ series of steps. This is part of what creates the level of safety in the room that makes risk-taking by audience members possible.

During the week in between the first and second rehearsals I mulled and mulled and mulled. Rehearsed an introduction like one rehearses a monologue on the stage. It’s the old actor in me. I also realized that it was not ME who needed to know how to move from Fear to Hope – what I needed to do was acknowledge that I didn’t know – that we really were in this together – that each night it was a co-creation, a co-discovery with the audience. Not only did this take the pressure off of me, it opened up a very creative and investigative space for everyone in the room each night.

Successes

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that every night of the run we had audience members who had NEVER been to a theatre event before. The name “Reclaiming Hope” got them; sometimes a friend who knew our work dragged them to the venue.

We played, as we always do, to VERY diverse audiences. Interestingly, depending on the venue the way this diversity manifested was different from night to night. The event in Kitsilano for instance was quite White – unusually so for us – and had really a lot of people well over 50 in the audience. This balances off by the events at Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House that had a much younger crowd, generally and many People of Colour. This was a very good aspect of moving the events around.

There are many ‘moments’....I am going to briefly detail two:

After the first event at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre:

The comment from an Elder after the event who said that because of the great diversity in the audience, even though the CONTENT was not about Reconciliation, it is the work we were doing - and also some of the men at the back who started off the event by heckling, but stayed for the whole 2.5 hours and ended up contributing and who spoke about the voices in

their own heads that make them feel small and how to overcome those voices. I have been around long enough to know how important that was.

A young trans person whose story about transitioning was explored onstage at one of the events came back three times. At the third event they attended, they came to talk with me after and wanted me to know that earlier in the day they'd had a conversation with their mother and recognized the EXACT voice of the mother character we had put on the stage in their **real mother**. Because of the Reclaiming Hope evening about their story they were able to talk with their mother in an embracing, loving way and open up a space of acceptance for both of them. This young person wanted me to know that the Reclaiming Hope event had had and was having a real and concrete effect on their life.

If these two things happened (there are other stories) there must also more. Others' words are more appropriate about this than mine:

"Great show (Reclaiming Hope) at Mount Pleasant. Hope is way more fun than fear."

Shahira Llana

"Reclaiming Hope was quite a remarkable evening, members of the community coming together in a spirit of exploration and healing. This is theatre that reaches out and connects. A fascinating and profoundly theatrical event."

David C. Jones, OutTV

"I attended Reclaiming Hope at Heartwood Cafe. Theatre for Living is powerful - an opportunity to open dialogues otherwise often denied or quashed. An opportunity to really listen, share, work through, experiment, play, consider etc... so many things addressing various real world issues."

Jeff Kirkby

"Reclaiming Hope taps into the collective psyche of the local community. Its good medicine that is healthy for the soul and contributes to positive and safer communities. The work that Theatre for Living does bridges the many manufactured divides in our society and the world."

J. Peachy

"When we talk about important work being done out in the community: that is Theatre for Living's *Reclaiming Hope*. Powerful, potent, connected."

Humaira Hamid

April 3, 2016 was the **Day of Concrete Action Planning**. Only people who came to a *Reclaiming Hope* event could attend. This day was facilitated by Kevin Millsip¹ and meant to help people gather in 'groups of interest' based on issues that arose in the *Reclaiming Hope* events and plan concrete actions together. The day is explained in some detail below.

Challenges

We didn't have the money to work inside our normal office model which is to bring on a full-time publicist for the duration of the project to work in the office alongside our outreach co-ordinator. We opted instead for an 'outside' publicist. First, let me say she was terrific. Responsive, organized, creative. The pre-press was great and she was a pleasure to work with.

¹ Co-founder of Check Your Head, Get Your Vote On, Past Vancouver School Board Trustee, and currently co-founder and Director of Next Up. Kevin is also the President of Theatre for Living's Board of Directors.

What didn't happen was the synergy of the publicist being in the same room, 8-hours a day, as the outreach coordinator and hearing him on the phone with someone and being able to go – 'Oh!....that made me think we should do x'....and vice versa. The synergetic energy in which outreach supports publicity and publicity supports outreach never really happened – they ended up working as individual "islands" and for a theatre company like us, whose whole modus operandi is grassroots organizing.....it hurt. This is one of the things that affected attendance.

We've got to fix this for the next project. If it means not hiring a community liaison person or a student to support outreach because that money needs to go to a full-time publicist, then that's what will need to happen.

The venues had an AVERAGE capacity of 81 people. At 68% houses this is a project with low attendance for us. Of course the 'no play, no actors' no script' event is a hard sell, as mentioned. But as you can see from the attendance figures, in the "Box Office" section of this report, the numbers fluctuated wildly from night to night – not the kind of slow build we are used to in a run. One has to assume that part of the issue here is varying levels of 'buy-in' from partners, which also has to do with their varying levels of being able to commit to putting the necessary elbow grease into helping bring out an audience.

As a theatre company we are very committed to community engagement – not because it is suddenly popular but because it has been the foundation of our work for the last 3 decades. The Community-based organizations are themselves more and more stretched, though and so we are rethinking HOW we engage and what we are asking of them in collaborations.

Box Office figures

Admission to all venues was by donation, except for the 2 events at the Scotiabank Dance Centre. These were \$10 per ticket. The Dance Centre events also, however, had vouchers that were distributed into the very low income community via agencies. We do this for all of our ticketed events, to ensure financial accessibility. This is why the box office figures are not a multiple of \$10.

Location	Attendance	Capacity	% of house	Money	avg donation
Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre	66	75	88%	263.25	3.99
Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House	32	80	40%	203.90	6.37
Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House	38	80	48%	146.60	3.86
Kitsilano Neighbourhood House	62	80	78%	371.25	5.99
SFU Woodward's	45	100	45%	294.00	6.53
Heartwood Community Café	60	60	100%	267.00	4.45
Groundswell Café	49	60	82%	359.50	7.34
Groundswell Café	29	60	48%	185.15	6.38
Unitarian Church of Vancouver	93	80	116%	723.15	7.78
UBC First Nations Longhouse	30	100	30%	331.15	11.04

Scotiabank Dance Centre \$10 tickets	65	100	65%	440.00	10.00	20 vouchers
Scotiabank Dance Centre \$10 tickets	79	100	79%	700.00	10.00	9 vouchers
	648	975	68%	4,284.95	6.37	
Day of Concrete Action Planning at Scotiabank Dance Centre	37	50	74%	n/a	n/a	

The money

Theatre for Living has full time staff of 3.8 positions. Although we are very grateful for our operating funds from the Canada Council, BC Arts Council and City of Vancouver, combined they do not cover the costs of these salaries, let alone keeping the office open. That means every project we do has to also help cover basic operating costs – the larger the project, the higher the percentage.

Going in, as mentioned, we had contracts signed for the FREEDOM project which had to be cancelled. We paid out percentages of contracts to design team members who would had set time aside in their schedules. The freelance design world is difficult, and Vancouver is not a large community in which to make a living. This was the honourable thing to do. We also paid out ‘penalties’ for cancelling rehearsal and performance space.

In the end, Reclaiming Hope had a budget of \$101,971 and income, including all portions of operating grants, project grants and earned income of \$101,997.

The Reclaiming Hope events



Photo: D. Diamond at Simon Fraser University event

Introducing the events each night

I always started by thanking the organizers for the evening, then acknowledging we are on unceded Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Territory, and then laying some of the context around planning the FREEDOM project and how it transformed.

I want to write a bit about First Nations Territory acknowledgement. I did something “risky” with it that went over very well with any Indigenous friends I asked for feedback about it, but I could tell challenged some members of some audiences.

At each event I acknowledged we are on unceded Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Territory and then asked audience members how many of them are hearing this acknowledgement at most of the events they attend? Many hands in the air. I reminded us that the event tonight is about ‘internal voices’ and then said that in preparing for the events, I had a surprising voice inside me ask a question: ‘Am I going to have to acknowledge Territory every night? Don’t we know?’ (I could see this really challenged people sometimes.) Then another voice inside me, I said, answered. ‘Yes, of course you’ll have to do it every night and here’s why: Its because the repetition of it, over and over again, is ONE of the things that, for some of us, will transform it from a ‘concept’ that floats out there into a reality that permeates every thread of our lives and changes how we ARE, moment to moment, on this land.’

The audience was always very quiet at this point. This happened, I think, because the sense I have is real, that for many it's a great 'concept' that floats 'out there'....but what does it mean, really mean in the fabric of our lives? How do things change? What changes?²

Also, I'd mention having done some research about *hope* getting ready for the project. An interesting thing bubbled up. All my life, I think, I've perceived hope as an emotion. There is intelligent writing out there that presents hope not as a emotion, but as a thought process³ a thought process grounded in struggle. From within our struggles we hope to move to a different, healthier place. This idea that hope is grounded in struggle and also is a precursor to movement became very important to me in my facilitation of the events.

I also acknowledged with audiences each night that it is sometimes challenging in the world today to have hope. Of course there are good things happening in the world but there are also many worrisome things happening out there that make it difficult to be hopeful. When I asked audiences how many in the room each night were feeling this, always 80 to 90% of the hands would go up. This had to make what happened each night very vital to the people who came.

I'd ask audiences how many in the room related, in their own experiences, to what I was saying about being told to live in fear. Every night (once again) 80-90% of the hands would go up. This would give me the opportunity to then ask 'how'. Could some of the people, in a sentence or two, not long paragraphs, explain how they were being told to live in fear – about what specifically? Often the answers started off being kind of generic: Fear of being alone, fear of aging, fear of not finding housing, fear of not succeeding. It was OK to start from this place. One "meets" a community where they are. The answers started things bubbling. On some nights, when the partnering organizations had clear focus (this was not always the case) I could ask the audience to focus into the 'territory' of the partnering organizations for that evening: Environmental issues, issues specifically emerging from Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities, etc. It wasn't that this necessarily meant that the focus of the evening would then narrow down – sometimes it did and sometimes it didn't, but universality, I believe, comes from specificity. Whatever got articulated in the question/answer segments, fed the consciousness awakening at the early stage of the event.

Then I explained the process carefully each night, not wanting people to get caught up in something they were not prepared for. There is a 'consent' issue here – people can't engage unless they know what's going to be expected of them. Here's the explanation:

After a short physical 'warm-up' that is fun and will help set the texture of the evening⁴, I will ask for three people who are willing to offer stories from your own lives – not friends' lives, not relatives' lives, not the movies – your lives – in the relative present, please, let's not go back to our childhoods. The story is of a moment when you had to make a decision

² This is the subject matter of our next large project in 2017.

³ The first thing I heard was a podcast that is not shareable here, but here is an article: http://www.bhevolution.org/public/cultivating_hope.page

⁴ This was always the 'pushing' activity with a partner....trying to find the balance of strength between each other.

about something and in that decision-making moment, you know there are these voices of fear in your head, and you know they are giving you unhealthy advice; advice that is bad for your family, community, or the environment. All of these instances mean they are also bad for you. Maybe the voices of fear are suggesting you abandon an inherent value system.

Three people will offer and we'll hear the three stories and then vote for the story that resonates the most with this audience. I want you to know that if you offer a story and the room chooses your story, you will be here, onstage, with me for the rest of the evening, as yourself. Having said that, we are not here to do a psychoanalysis of the story teller. The storyteller has to be prepared to give their story away. It will become a symbol, much larger than the original story – a symbol that serves the audience tonight.

The moment you choose can be a big dramatic moment – that's OK – but more often than not the really wonderful stories come out of small moments – seemingly inconsequential moments – as it is these that make up the fabric of our lives.

We did the warm up:



Photo: Tim Matheson

Take a partner – any partner will do. Stand facing each other and place your hands on each other's shoulders, and push. Really push. Use your muscles. One of you is going to be stronger than the other. That's life. The person who is less strong, push harder. The person who is stronger, push less hard. Don't try to push each other over. This isn't about winning or losing. The idea is to find the balance of strength between the two of you. Do this without speaking. Have the conversation with your bodies. You should always be moving. Don't just lean against each other, push!



Photo: Tim Matheson

Use different parts of your bodies. And again. And again.⁵

Then, I suggested that we had now entered the realm of the theatre, where *everything* is symbolic. So, let's start to think symbolically. When you think about your own struggles with the voices of fear and your experience of doing the pushing game. Are there any insights you have about the fears or your struggles with them that come from the symbolism of the pushing you just did?

There always were and they were very often different, as audience chemistry shifted each night. Some common threads (but there were often completely new things said each night):

- In real life there isn't 'balance' I get overwhelmed;
- I am afraid to push too hard – won't give myself permission to use my real strength;
- I really want something to push against (who am I if I am not pushing?)

There was another reason I always started with the pushing game. It contains the central theatrical relationship of opposing forces necessary for dramatic tension. I would explain this and say to people – 'please if you come to do this, and some of you will, do not come here to play a theatre game. Come to engage. Come because you have knowledge to share. That's where the power of this event lives.'

OK – who has stories?.....and off we would go.

Thursday, March 10, 2016

Partners:

Aboriginal Front Door Society, Journeys Around the Circle & Native Education College

Venue: Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre (VAFC)

Capacity: 75

Attendance 66

% of House: 88%

OK – we are open! A great opening night of Reclaiming Hope at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre.

Office staff (Dafne Blanco, David Ng, Susan Shank and Tstia Adzich (short-term contract to assist David with outreach) and Jodi Smith (onsite publicist) have been very busy as the project has built. Its been a quieter time for me not having a play to make, REALLY rehearse, tech....

There's a way, because of that, that the 'reality' of doing these hasn't been real. I wasn't nervous until about 3PM and then, kaboom! Nerves are not a bad thing, though, and the two rehearsals I

⁵ From my book, *Theatre for Living: the art and science of community-based dialogue*.

got to do with friends of TfL in the last 2 weeks helped. There were two mysteries for me coming into this:

1. how to get the introduction to work – I was happy with it last night
2. how to bring out the connective tissue that helps us see the journey from fear to hope. This is getting more apparent for me and SOME of it is admitting in the introduction that I don't have a magic formula to do it – that we really are entering an event of co-creation. It's not my responsibility – it's ours. I also made the linkage inside myself that 'fear is an enemy of hope'. This makes sense to me in that fear can paralyze us and hope is about a desire to move somehow from a *here* to a *there*. I also came across some writing – thanks to friend, Susan Powell, about hope and incorporated it – that hope is a thought process that comes out of struggle. Putting these things together has clarified the event for me and therefore the introduction.

Our first set-up went relatively smoothly – I think we've (Dorothy⁶ mostly) figured out the peculiarities of this sound system. Everything is in both our cars. Mine is now rattling like crazy because of all the stuff in the trunk and backseat. ;)

This was a good house, although we marked it 'sold out' and there were empty seats in the end. The vagaries of doing work for 'donation'. This night was particularly complicated in that 'sold out' included leaving 20 seats for VAFC people who generally don't make reservations....the event is in their building. They came and reservations, I think, didn't show.

Stories came fairly easily although two of them were kind of similar. The first offer was from a man who described himself as having mental health issues – clean and sober for about a year – off the streets and very 'alive'...energy flowing like lightning bolts – also through the dark sunglasses he was wearing. It took a lot to get a specific story from him where, when, what exactly – in the street, over a year ago, deciding to get clean and sober.

The third story came from a man who one of the organizers was afraid would offer a story. He (evidently) gets up at events all the time and tells the same long story each time. I had no way to stop this....but he came with 3 sheets of typed paper and wanted to read that and I COULD stop that. It didn't take long to coax a moment from him and, unfortunately, it was pretty much the same story as the first man. This has never happened before in one of these events and there have been hundreds of them....

The room chose (quite overwhelmingly) the second story – from a woman who was deeply emotionally engaged in what she told. Its possible that the similarity of the two men's stories 'split the vote' – but I'm liking to think that the audience, in its intelligence, knew that both of the men would be very hard to work with and the event would take off more with the woman. A kind of group (transrational, actually) intelligence.

⁶ Dorothy Jenkins, Stage Manager extraordinaire – we have done many projects (also tours) together.

Christine's⁷ story: She is sitting in her bedroom at her desk, studying for her French Language Teaching Degree. She's having a very, very hard time. These are the voices and their shapes⁸:

Voice 1: (arms around head) - Language Teacher
 Catherine I want you to be afraid of your voice.
 You shouldn't be doing this.
 You are not successful.

Voice 2: (hand in front of eyes) - Sister-in-law
 Catherine I want you to be afraid of the truth.
 You don't have what it takes.
 Choose something else.

Voice 3: (fists over head) - Auntie
 Catherine I want you to be afraid that you don't matter.
 You have nothing to say.
 You're insignificant.

Hmm.....the reason I want to write these reports as soon as I get home after an event is that now, at 2PM the next day, last night is foggy.⁹

There were some lovely and also difficult things about last night. The story was 'simple' in a great way, allowing people to insert their own situations into it. Two of the voices were really clear, the third was not – a combination, in my mind, of two things:

1. I try to make the relationships meaningful. "Language Teacher" although specific to the story, has very little emotional resonance. Its generic. The actor cannot play "language teacher"but the woman insisted. I won't argue in front of an audience.
2. The woman who came to play it could not remember her phrases. She came up with the first one herself, Christine gave her the second, and she chose the third from suggestions from the audience. Dorothy gave her the phrases half a dozen times. She just could not hold onto them. I suppose I could have asked her if she really wanted to do this earlier, that might have saved some frustration, but honestly, in all these years I've never encountered someone who just couldn't remember at all. She was the third voice we worked on. Eventually I asked her if it was OK if someone else came to play the "Language Teacher", she agreed, and a different woman came and dove in with gusto.

⁷ I will always change people's names in these reports for confidentiality reasons.

⁸ I've asked Dorothy who is with me at all the events to take notes about the shapes and the 3 phrases we come up with for each voice, and email them to me. This will help me with the reports, but is also really useful during the event.

⁹ We went out for a well-deserved staff celebration after the event last night.

The detail of interventions is gone....and its coming up to 3PM – I need to have ‘dinner’ soon and start getting ready to leave for the event tonight. General things that emerged were about Reclaiming Hope in discomfort (being comfortable inside the discomfort), in knowing its not our "job" to save the whole world....many other insights.

The audience was really diverse and engagement was deep. Feedback right after was tremendous. A lot of audience members came up and expressed their appreciation. Important to me was the comment from an Elder who said that because of the great diversity in the audience, even though the CONTENT was not about Reconciliation, it is the work we were doing - and also some of the men at the back who started off the event by heckling, but stayed for the whole 2.5 hours and ended up contributing and who spoke about the voices in their own heads that make them feel small and how to overcome those voices. I have been around long enough to know how important that was. John and Bob (central organizers) were also struck by this. I gave Bob, from Aboriginal Front Door a ride home. He loved what had happened – and is, I think, a very critical guy.

Also the first man who offered a story – the one with all the energy, came and gave me a long hug and expressed how much he appreciated what happened in the room. He is such an interesting guy – on the surface he seems kind of out of control, but he’s actually really present – perhaps processing so much information that he doesn’t know what to do with it...how to handle it. The language of Images really, really spoke to him.

Friday, March 11, 2016

Partners:

Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House

Venue:	Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House (MPNH)
Capacity:	80
Attendance	32
	% of House: 40%

The event went well tonight. There were people who came to me after who really, truly loved it. And David Ng told me a story: there was very elderly woman in front who uses a walker. Of course I saw her. What I didn’t know was that her daughter arrived at one point in a panic because she didn’t know where her mother was and wanted her mom to leave, and the woman refused – she was having too interesting a time.

And yet....we went into tonight with 54 reservations. Everyone was either emailed or called today. David spoke with some TODAY. They said they were coming. 30 of the reservations didn’t show up. 30!! Its so disrespectful. We had 8 walk-ins, bringing the audience to 32 people.

We’ve done events at MPNH before and had very large houses – over capacity – this is why we both thought we should do two events. Blanca, our central contact (who we all like and who has

been terrific) ended up going away for the weeks building up to the event and it appears no one really stepped in to take her place.

Each of these events cost us about \$8,000, after salaries, publicity, production costs. I don't think our partners understand this. Not certain what to do about tomorrow, also at MPNH. Last I heard there were 24 reservations. Thankfully, other nights are picking up.

Three good stories did get offered. The one chosen - "Sad Turkey Dinner":

Sarah has gone back home to Cranbrook (small town BC) for Christmas. At dinner, someone at the table makes a terrible comment about people with disabilities. She is an activist in Vancouver. She is very annoyed, angry, etc....and says nothing.

Voice 1 - Left hand in front of face and leaned over her - Mother

I want you to be quiet.
It's useless to say anything.
It's just a joke.

Voice 2 - Kneeling beside Sarah, hands together as if in prayer - Best Friend

I want you to let this go.
They're not worth it.
They'll never understand.

Voice 3 - Hands above Sarah's head as though about to do a karate chop on her neck - Racist Uncle

Who do you think you are?
I want you to conform
It's Christmas for crying out loud

One of the things that came up tonight that was new was a sense of reclaiming hope by stepping out into the unknown. In the case of this story – a fear is that one will alienate one's family, best friend....be an outsider. 'Hope' lies in accepting that and, in order to be true to ones values and self, risk the alienation. Out in the unknown are others of like-mind. They find you – you find them. Transformation happens by risking being alone. A lot of people resonated with this.

A second new thing was with the Mother voice (who was terrific) and actually honouring the voice; not to do what it suggests, but to befriend it, knowing in an ironic way its trying to help you. Do we have parents who taught us really good lessons that they no longer or never followed? How do we honour those lessons (not throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak)?

Also tonight were insights similar to last night regarding becoming comfortable in the discomfort and that this is a space in which we Reclaim Hope.

I had a long chat with a young woman studying psychology at UBC who is also running support groups. She absolutely loved the evening, although she said nothing during the event. She loved the complexity in it, she said, and the compassion for both ourselves and the characters in our lives who are these voices. She talked about the event as a road to Peace, both internal and external. She said she'd come to more events.

I hope, hope, hope that this audience does what I asked of them and helps bring more people in for tomorrow.

Saturday, March 12, 2016

Partners:

Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House

Venue:	Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House (MPNH)		
Capacity:	80		
Attendance	38	% of House:	48%

Disappointing turnout, but the event went very well. The story chosen was called: Cyber Trans

Sam is early in transition (male to female). They are sitting at their computer, having written a post that is going to go public about transitioning. Sam's good, close friends/family know, but this is a big step. Sam is about the press "post" and....

Voice 1 - Mother

There's no turning back if you do this...
You have to be completely certain
You're not God

Voice 2 - Father

Why can't you be normal?
No-one wants to listen to you
This is ridiculous

Voice 3 - Elementary School Teacher

Just shut down
Disappear
Or at least make it tasteful

Things that seemed important to me about tonight:

The audience voted overwhelmingly for this story – part of that, I think was the clarity and grounded nature of Sam. In voting overwhelmingly we were able to acknowledge that so many

had “access” through the experience of people’s own challenges to either not accept themselves for who they were, or have other people demanding they be someone other than who they were, and the self-doubt and fearful paralysis that can come from that.

The young man who played Father (who it turns out knows Sam AND Sam’s father) spoke eloquently at the end about how “Reclaiming Hope” was, for him, attached to this very event. That a group of such different people, people who would never end up in the same room, were able to connect through such a personal and sensitive story, so generously and respectfully. THIS gave him hope.

Sam talked about how amazing it was, and how grateful they are for the realization that their story is in a way everyone’s story – how challenging it was to ‘give it away’ and how beautiful it was to have it resonate with so many people in different ways.

Sunday, March 13, 2016

Partners:

**Sierra Club BC; The Society Promoting Environmental Conservation (SPEC);
Kitsilano Neighbourhood House**

Venue:	Kits Neighbourhood House		
Capacity:	80		
Attendance	62	% of House:	78%

Well, that was better in numerous ways.

First, we had GREAT help both getting in and out. 4 very friendly people who were all eager to do whatever it took.....things went quickly. And then, Although it was POURING rain and gale force winds, 62 people braved the weather.

Interestingly, last night with 38 people, although the story was really good and the evening went well, when it was over I was completely exhausted. Tonight with 62, I felt energized at the end. Maybe it’s the time change – 10 PM was really 9PM....but I think it’s the energy difference of numbers.

A history tidbit: Headlines Theatre performed our first play, *Buy, Buy Vancouver* in Kits House in 1981 – about rising housing prices, affordability and the housing crisis. This got a good, if not cynical, laugh off the top.

The story: Greed

Ellen is at Vancity with her husband and a financial advisor. They are trying to plan for old age. She is 61. She wants ethical investments. The advisor is telling her that doing that will mean she

runs out of money at age 73. What does she do? She wants to live longer than that and also retain her life style.....

Voice 1 - grandmother (hands out threateningly)

I want you to take care of yourself.

You can't depend on anybody else to take care of you.

You're on your own.

Voice 2 - mother (hands in front of face)

I want you to make better life decisions.

You have to think things through.

You're a failure.

Voice 3 - grandfather (hand on hip, finger pointing)

I want you to behave like an adult.

See reality the way it really is.

Don't be such an idealist.

Some of the interesting things tonight:

About 2/3 through the event it occurred to me that all of the interventions focused on \$\$ and security. None of them ever mentioned the environment, although this was central to the dilemma in the story. 'Why is that' I asked...

The room was quite taken aback by this. An environmentally conscious group. Also pretty privileged financially, if my assumptions are correct (and I think they are)...really a Kitsilano crowd...and so we opened a door that led to thoughts about actually having to give things up in order to be true to stated values. Can we live on 66% of our current budget? On 50%? What would we have to give up in order for the money to last? For some people this is not possible....but in THIS audience....

A Facebook Message just came from Parker Johnson, City of Vancouver. He was there and commented on how much he enjoyed it and how different this audience was from 'the usual' for us. Like at *maladjusted*¹⁰, for instance. I believe this is what he's responding to. Its good, not bad.

There was a moment when an intervener ended up embracing the grandfather. It was really ambiguous....yes – nice to reconcile with the grandfather on a personal level, but is this also a surrender of values? The room is split some think yes and some no. It opens up a conversation, about the volume level of the voices and how we regulate that.

¹⁰ *Maladjusted* was a very successful large project, created and performed by mental health patients and caregivers. It investigated how all of us are being asked to adjust to a maladjusted (mechanized) mental health system and asked how we humanize care. The play performed in Vancouver in 2013 and in 2015 and toured BC and Alberta, finishing with a second run in Vancouver.

A very elderly woman spoke at the end when I asked about insights. She talked about difficult and charged conversations she is having with her family and friends now, and how this event had filled her with hope that she could navigate the stressful conversations. I am paraphrasing terribly, but this was the sense of it. Terrific.

The feedback was great after from young and elderly – how important this work is, innovative, reaching deep inside issues, creating positive change at personal levels. I'm hoping they are all on their computers right now drumming up audiences. ;)

Tuesday, March 15, 2016

Partners:

Gen Why Media; Check Your Head; Simon Fraser University

Venue: SFU Woodward's Djavad Mowafaghian World Art Centre
 Capacity: 100
 Attendance 45 % of House: 45%

This was the 4th one of these in a row – the only time we are doing this many together, thankfully. I'm really exhausted.

From what I understand there were 61 reservations going into tonight. That's a 26% no-show rate.

There's was lots of really terrific feedback after. Also, the person who was the centre of the transitioning story came back. I think they may have wanted to see the event from outside it ;).

Get-in was good...the directions worked and every one was there. Get-out was complex, just because the Cordova entry door to parking was locked so we had to walk around to the Water entrance....through a movie shoot...then figure out the puzzle of the elevator and floors (hard to explain but like the twilight zone), then the Cordova exit was closed so we had to double back and drive around. The people waiting at the loading bay thought we'd abandoned them! Then after packing the cars, everyone left and we drove to the gate. it wouldn't open. We waited. Nothing. I went back and called security. That person called the other security guy who by then wasn't at his desk but was talking with Dorothy. He didn't want at first to let us out...who were we....what were we taking out....he'd not been informed of anything. I started to steam...he told me not to get mad....he opened the gate.

The evening went well. It took a LONG time for stories to be offered but we got them. The one we worked on:

May is sitting on her sofa, mulling over something she has been thinking about for 10 years! She is very comfortable where she is. Its taken time to get comfortable in the community, in her position, in her job. She COULD move "up" – an opportunity is presenting itself, but if she goes, she will

lose her support system and....people will find out she's a "fraud". She really doesn't know what she's doing. I should say that it is clear that May is very accomplished and intelligent....these are fears that many of us share. The room voted overwhelmingly for this story.

Best Friend: behind May, arms out, hands down, above May's Head

I want you to stay put;
This is where you belong;
It doesn't get any better than this.

Male Employer: lying in fetal position, back to May

I want you to disappear;
You don't belong here;
You have no right.

Dad: standing, pointing finger at May

You'll embarrass yourself;
People like you have to work twice as hard;
What were you thinking?

We worked on Dad first. The interesting thing in this for me was that the man playing Dad had an epiphany in the exercise. He commented on it twice. He understood his own father better from standing in his shoes. In terms of Reclaiming Hope this was important to us all. Understanding the perspective of the voices at some level opens up space for us. Space to move and breathe.

The best friend voice, in this instance, can paralyze us or be an ally, depending on how intense we let the voice be. "This is where you belong" and "It doesn't get any better than this" in particular can be exhilarating, not paralyzing. How do we apply these to the place of discomfort, the unknown? Even being in free-fall? We also explored how this voice may have its own fear, of not wanting to be abandoned. The decision to leave this voice behind or take it with us does not have to limit our decision to MOVE.

Male Employer – I have to say, I didn't understand the decision to label these phrases and also this position as the "Male employer". The suggestion from an audience member was "all men" and I rejected it because the actor can't possibly play "all men" without creating a cartoon, a caricature, that will be meaningless in the exercise. One of the interveners quit the job, left the employer and we got to talk about that kind of radical decision...have people done this? Yes....one of the insightful comments (for me) was that having thrown ones self off the cliff, one just HAD to adapt.

When I asked if people were taking away insights into reclaiming hope in their own lives, lots of people raised their hands and 3 spoke. I just can't remember what any were now....:(

Thursday, March 17, 2016

Partners:

Out on Screen; Our City of Colours; Lighthouse of Hope Christian Fellowship

Venue: Heartwood Café

Capacity: 60

Attendance 60 % of House: 100%

Very nice to have a full house. We had 38 reservations so there must have been a lot of walk-ins. Doing these in cafés has a very nice energy – it fits the relaxed nature of the event. I was surprised, as was Dorothy, at the story the audience chose. It was by a slim margin....but nevertheless. It turned out, though, that a lot of people in the audience identify as artists in some way – and (pleased with myself about this) I managed to make the theatre story relevant across many levels.

The Internal Theatre Spiral

Annabelle (A) is sitting on her bed checking emails, looking for audition possibilities in theatre. She has wanted to be a theatre artist (onstage) since she was 3 years old. Its hard, though. Auditions are cruel and she is wondering if she should give up. An opportunity is presenting itself for full-time employment in something else. Should she give up on who/what she believes herself to be, because others are not validating her?

Dad: Finger pointing to A
Work harder
You need to get a real job
you need to survive

Jealous Friend: Hands at A's throat:
Swallow your pain
Your voice is worthless
They're just gonna laugh at you

Sister: curled up in a fetal position on the bed
Give up
You're too lazy for this
All this effort won't amount to anything anyway

What I'm pleased about managing to do is connecting the auditioning, wanting to be an actor, and what the voices are saying to how many of us struggle with being able to truly be validated for who we are. I wanted to make these connections because the organizers were all from the Queer Community in some way and it was surprising that none of the stories reflected that....although many of the comments about fears early on, did. I saw many faces light up when I asked us to

make the connection about this validation of ourselves – not just to think about it in the actor/theatre realm.

There was a very high level of engagement tonight. I went to the audience a lot. This is feeling like a better and better thing to do and I am feeling more comfortable doing it.

The things that came up tonight that felt important:

- Again – this sense of hope in finding comfort in the discomfort....this is a pattern that I'm not inventing. Its rising up every night in various ways;
- Hope in compassion for the other and for ourselves;
- Hope in realizing that the voices that undermine us belong to someone else;
- Hope in finding community in which we can be true to ourselves.

Hope in this: The young person whose story was done a few nights ago at MPNH about transitioning came for the third time tonight. They came to talk with me after and wanted me to know that earlier in the day they'd had a conversation with their mother and recognized the EXACT voice of the mother...

There's no turning back if you do this...
You have to be completely certain
You're not God

....in their **real mother**. Because of the Reclaiming Hope evening they were able to talk with their mother in an embracing, loving way and open up a space of acceptance for both of them. This young person wanted me to know that the Reclaiming Hope event had had and was having a real and concrete effect on their life. It's terrific.

We are very, very worried about numbers for Friday and Saturday at Groundswell. Looking for a miracle between now and then.

Friday, March 18, 2016

Partners:

Groundswell Grassroots Economic Alternatives

Venue: Groundswell Café
Capacity: 60
Attendance 49 % of House: 82%

A few days ago tonight had 8 reservations. We went into the event with 41. This is a great improvement! Congrats everyone!

There were a lot of terrific comments, but this was hard tonight. You throws your dice and you takes your chances.....

The space is difficult. We really did need a stage here. The set-up is similar to last night but the audience had more 'open space' somehow. Without a stage people really had a hard time seeing tonight. This made it difficult for the back 50% of the room to stay connected. I want to try to reconfigure the room tomorrow.

The story chosen was great. A young man (Gerald - G) has come to THIS EVENT because it looks interesting and is across the street, looking at the café. People are inside. His (ongoing) fear of walking into a room of strangers appears. Its just easier to keep walking, stay alone, stay unconnected.

The title of the story is "Connection"

Initially boy-bully...then Dad - standing, hiding face in sweater:

I want you to be invisible;
Avoid eye contact with other people;
You're worthless.

Mom - crouched down, back to G, unable to see him:

I want you to get out of here;
Shrink as small as you possibly can;
Be scared.

School Principal - poised as though running away:

Escape;
Get on the next bus and go home;
Then keep walking.

I knew when the voices were named "boy-bully" and "school principle" that we would have problems. I tried to get them to get more personal, but they would not. Its impossible for a performer to play these generic characters in an authentic manner. Cartoons get created.

We started with boy-bully and nothing was working in the improvisation. It was completely wooden, had no intention, no emotional connection. After trying and trying I stopped it and insisted we make the character personal. The woman playing the role suggested Dad and everything changed.

The thing that stands out to me about the interventions was when someone told Dad that these fears about being worthless etc., belong to HIM, that G doesn't need to own them. The audience related really strongly to this – knowing when to divorce one's self from the fearful voice because it belongs to someone else.

The tactic with the Mom voice was quite different...this fear was not demeaning – it was protective. One woman tried to love Mom but when she didn't get what she wanted immediately started the same old argument. When I pointed this out the intervener was at first really caught off guard and then 'owned' this graciously....because she knows she does it. She acknowledged that it gave her a lot to think about...her husband, who it turned out was there, gave me a big thumbs up....we were all laughing, including the woman.

Maybe the mom voice could help us in ways, if we keep it under control. A second intervener invited Mom to come into the event...they could leave if it got too intense or scary. This was, once again, being comfortable inside the discomfort and worked beautifully with this voice.

The school principle was also really wooden. But in the intervention that we did on it, I realized that the principal represents the rules. How many of us in here have been or are rule breakers? I bet 98% of the hands went up....we got to talk about hope residing in our ability to break rules....that living in fear has itself become a rule and rules, of course, are meant to be broken.

There were lots of comments about insights in the evening....about hope being in not talking so much but listening....hope in curiosity about the other....hope in finding the positive aspects of a fear....

A man from the local MPs office (Jenny Kwan's) came tonight. The only person in the room in a suit. He stayed for 15 or 20 minutes and left. I kind of want to inform Jenny....have her ask him for a report-back on the event.

We are back at Groundswell tomorrow.

Saturday, March 19, 2016

Partners:

Groundswell Grassroots Economic Alternatives

Venue:	Groundswell Café	
Capacity:	60	
Attendance	29	% of House: 48%

Tonight went better than last night – smoother and deeper – but attendance tonight was really problematic. Its frustrating because the people who are coming are loving it. We are seeing people (some tonight) for the 3rd time. People bringing friends because its "must see". How do we translate that into more attendance?

The story tonight, "Going Home" was iconic and the woman at the centre was terrific and authentic.

Michelle's (M) mother is an alcoholic. The last time they saw each other (years ago) it was very bad. Mom is in Ontario. M is here, making her own life. She is at home getting ready to go for brunch and the phone rings. Its her grandmother. Mom is in the hospital, overdosed on alcohol and could die. Grandmom wants M to come home. M doesn't really want to. The voices:

Sister - hand over M's mouth:

Be silent

Everything you say is wrong

Nobody wants to hear what you have to say

Ex-boyfriend - One hand on M's head, one hand on M's stomach in front:

Crumble

You can't handle this

Don't even try

Grandmother - two fingers pointing towards M's eyes:

Be a good daughter

You've failed

Don't put yourself first

Engagement tonight was exceptionally high and this made other depths possible. Some things that stand out:

Acknowledging the voices of fear is both scary and healthy. This applies to both the reality of this exercise (voices of family members) and also larger voices....the Media, Government, etc. Acknowledgement does not mean doing what they want. It means recognizing, really, their presence so we can look them in the eye. It is in attempts to deny them, run away from them, wrestle with them in which we become overwhelmed. There is hope in slowing down.

A wonderful young woman intervened with Grandmother and was very clear that sacrificing herself for her own mother was not healthy. This opened up a deep conversation in the room about the culture of sacrifice – a culture that MY mother and certainly grandparents were steeped in. There were various experiences of this and perspectives on it expressed – a space in which we could disagree – the sign, for me, of a healthy dialogue.

In the context of the story and the person offering it, there is fear that if we do not sacrifice we are not “good”and yet....isn't it this ethic that convinces (some) young people to go to war? (yes there are also economic factors, etc....this sacrificing is but one aspect). It also, for me, connects to an issue of values. We are “good” if we accept the values of the culture around us. This is where fear comes to bear – the fear of the consequences of not conforming.... hope exists in finding one's own commitment or the solidarity with others in which to also take care of one's self, knowing we can't care for others if/when we are depleted. The value system of depletion is killing us and the planet.

Tuesday, March 22, 2016

Partners:

Critical Muslim Voices; Independent Jewish Voices of BC; Social Justice Committee of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver

Venue: Unitarian Church (NOT the Sanctuary)

Capacity: 80

Attendance 93 % of House: 116%

Was the great attendance tonight the terrific 'pushing' that David and Tsatia are doing, the obvious organizing from the partners, or word of mouth? Or the idea that there was going to be "fireworks" at this event and so it'd be really entertaining? A combination, I imagine. REALLY nice to have a full house.

There was a great diversity in the room. I was kind of nervous going into this – knowing there was some kind of expectation set over things that I mostly don't have control over...like content. I made a point of asking us to focus the voices of fear into the mandates of our partners and asked audience members to articulate some of those fears in the hope that this would stimulate stories that were really focused into issues relevant to this evening.

When I asked for stories my heart went into my throat. Four white women, three of them elderly Jewish women rushed the stage seconds after I made the invitation. This would not normally be such 'an issue' but in the context of this night...

There are three chairs and we heard 3 stories. The first was about a mother and her disabled son. The second about a young woman's anxiety disorder. The third was the one we worked, that the audience voted for overwhelmingly. I was very thankful for Reena (R), a very elderly woman with a cane, sharp as a tack. I say this because I (shamefully) made an internal judgment about her that she wouldn't 'get' what we were doing....based on the package she is in. She was really terrific.

R is on the #22 bus. This is also the title of the story. It is crowded and there are lots of people of colour on the bus. Reena explains that two or three (I don't remember now) Eastern European young men start shouting racist slurs (calling people Niggers). Reena has stood up to racism all her life, having decided as a young child to not tolerate that, and I imagine other, oppressive behaviours. However in this moment, there are these voices in her head:

Husband - standing with fists in the air:

You're going to get hurt

You're completely vulnerable here

It's only going to get worse

One of the things I really played with tonight was the question (for all of the voices)...if the husband isn't the husband but something much larger....who/what is the husband? In this way we are able to relate the characters to larger, systemic things in our lives. Its essential to PLAY the husband, because the actor can't play "patriarchy" or "Bill C-51". We know, though, that the husband is a symbol.

At one point, about half-way through, I commented that a group at the back (I believe Muslim youth) were engaged enough to be raising their hands but would never express opinions. I asked them specifically to please start speaking....and they did.

Mother - hands over Reena as if to grab her:
 You don't have to speak up for other people
 You're very presumptuous
 You don't have the right

The investigation of this voice opened up what I think was a really valuable (and lengthy) section of the evening in which people spoke about the complexity of being an ally in a time of real sensitivity around appropriation and taking up spaces of oppressed people/communities. This is really complex in the activist community and many people spoke about the sensitivity required and balancing that against not just giving up because of feeling one's voice is not 'valid'. It strikes me that this is a really vital conversation at this moment in time. It was done with grace and generosity and therefore a very hopeful conversation.

Employer - behind Reena arms and fists up and clenched tight, a grimace on her face:
 Why do you have to speak out?
 You always want all the attention
 You're too sensitive

The "Employer" wants us not to be disruptive. Productivity goes down and that's really bad for the economy. This character was, in a way, at the heart of the cancelled FREEDOM project.

This night went the longest of any night so far – almost 3 hours! – but there was so much happening in the room. At the end people spoke about the hope involved in recognizing the fears and also recognizing that at times, the fears might be speaking partial truths. We could take bits of the messages to help us while ignoring other aspects. Also (again) hope in being able to have the conversations we had in such a diverse group.

Lots of appreciation after and my Naturopath was there....I saw her today, and she loved it. ;)

Wednesday, March 23, 2016

Partners:

UBC First Nations House of Learning; UBC Vancouver Equity and Inclusion

Venue: UBC First Nations House of Learning
 Capacity: 100
 Attendance 30 % of House: 30%

What happened with the audience tonight was very powerful. And...

We went into tonight with about 50 reservations. To say the turnout after being over-capacity last night was a disappointment would be an understatement.

Three very powerful stories were offered tonight. One from a young woman who needed to decide to face the fact that she had been abused as a child and break her silence about this with her family (the title was: a 604 bad decision). Another also from a young woman who is deciding to come out as queer to her mother (titled: OUT for a ride). The third from a Syrian refugee, a Queer man, who in his workplace needs mental health support regarding trauma and is trying to decide to get it. The audience overwhelmingly chose this third story (titled: A Queer Syrian Story).

A Queer Syrian Story

Ben (B) works for a Vancouver LGBTQ organization. He is in his office trying to work when he realizes he can't focus, is shaking....the Syria trauma and other stresses in his life in Vancouver are building up. He has tried mental health support before but the professional and he were not the right fit, and he stopped.

This was one of the quietest audiences we've had. Not certain what that was....it MIGHT be the "sacredness" of the space – a number of people commented on that after. At any rate animating was a lot of work and I noticed it was the same people (maybe a dozen of them) speaking and doing things. The rest were pretty silent throughout, until they gave feedback at the very end! This indicates they were present in all of it....just really quiet.

Ben and the three women who were the voices were all great – really open and playful. This is terrific, when we can do something this serious and have fun with it. I'll also say that I got into an exchange with an audience member at the back when I was setting up the voices and trying to make sure they were characters who could be 'lived'....his suggestions were all "capitalism" and "the economy". I explained as I often do that the actor can't play Capitalism....but can be a person who really believes in capitalism. He obviously disagreed and I said that in street theatre, when people are on stilts and big Images that can work, but not in a theatre event like this that relies on relationship. I don't think he liked that answer and shortly after, left.

I've been thinking about this and how sometimes one cannot compromise. I KNOW that letting people play ideas instead of people destroys the depth of the event...the cartoon nature of this can be fun but the insights are way, way less. At the same time, its difficult to piss people off and have them leave. However, its more important to know that trying to make everyone happy, to please everyone, dilutes what is possible and in the end, is a disservice to everyone.

Dad - Right arm across stomach, Left elbow on hand, fingers up to face, as though thinking/judging:

I want you to stop indulging yourself in your petty worries;
You're worthless;
Nobody cares.

This was a very difficult voice for the audience. Dad carries authority, certainly...and these judgmental voices are in so many of us and in such a personal way. Its possible the room was also 'warming up' with this first voice, but it felt like it paralyzed them the same way it paralyzed Ben.

Ex-boyfriend - standing behind B, hands pressing on shoulders:

You're not good enough;
You should quit;
People are talking behind your back.

It was inside this exploration that a young woman made an intervention in which she realized that the ex-boyfriend's voice was not HER voice and THIS led to a great discussion about how one manages to slow down enough to figure that out in the heat of the moment. We dissected it and realized that the FIRST step is to recognize the voice...and THEN one can understand it is not ours. This seemed really valuable in terms of reclaiming hope.

Employer - sitting, hand stretched towards B, palm up...a smile/grimace on her face:

I want you to value the privilege you've found and work harder to share it with others;
You're a fake if you can't do that;
They shouldn't have let you in.

The employer is also, of course a layer of Canadian Society. A powerful and really undermining/silencing voice. As the employer, she controls our ability to pay rent / buy food. The investigation of this and the ex-boyfriend overlapped as we got into discussions of "divorce" and leaving and how difficult that is, but also how necessary. The creation of personal safe space INSIDE OUR HEADS is one of the things that makes it possible to take risks, to be creative, to function in a healthy way out in the world for everyone, and particularly in this case, for activists.

Some articulated insights:

That we don't have to give in to our fears

That we must RECOGNIZE the voices first....then be able to realize they are not OUR inherent voices, before we can deal with them.

An audience member said he thought he was coming to an event about Terrorism, ISIS and all these external THINGS, and realized at the event that while the externals are real – the FEAR is always voices in our heads.

Again – comfort in discomfort

Friday, April 1, 2016

Partners:

Theatre for Living – self organized

Venue: Dance Centre
 Capacity: 100 – (really 140 but we blocked off 40 seats)
 Attendance 65 % of House: 65%

We never planned to have partners for the final two events at the Dance Centre. We KEPT the final two events there because the run of FREEDOM was booked into the theatre. Canceling the run was very challenging for them and us. They were able to rebook some of the dates. We kept the last 3 days.

We went into tonight with 81 reservations. Once again, an unacceptably high no-show rate. Having said that, it was a nice house and the event went really, really well. Lots of great feedback after.

The three stories – getting them was challenging: Veronica's (the one that was chosen) is below. The second story had to do with a woman whose child was present in the theatre, deciding whether to have that child or abort and, I think, having a dream in which God spoke to her to have the child. The third story was going to come from a woman but she ended up being very sensitive to the stage lights. We tried turning them down but the stage got too sleepy so she wanted to wear sunglasses and I couldn't let her do that because I need to see her eyes in order for the evening to function. So she went back to her seat and another woman came to offer this story: she's checking into a hotel in New York to meet her lover. At the desk a young very attractive man is checking in and she ends up booking a room with him. When I asked her if the voices of fear were giving her bad advice, she said, "not really" with a great deal of sexual innuendo. This is one of those moments for me when I'm asking myself how I got here and why I'm doing this... I tell her well we are here to explore voices of fear. Okay she says. I trusted the audience would understand and vote accordingly, which they did.

Veronica (V) has founded an organization that brings various aspects of issues together to try to find solutions to local and global environmental issues. V feels strongly that 'answers' are in embracing new ways of doing things – understanding the interconnectedness of all issues and moving away from a mechanical model. She is in a Board Room with a Funder and getting the money looks like it means agreeing to remain in an old model that she believes doesn't work and is, in fact, the problem. She is very tired of this fight.

Working for the Whole, but can I survive?

Male Mentor – Pulling V from a distance:

Give up the struggle;
There are forces too powerful;
You're insignificant.

This was a very powerful voice and there was a great investigation of how we “divorce” ourselves from him. Many of us have had mentors (some of them male) who have believed they had the answers for us....who might have been really valuable at one point but whose ideas we have outgrown. It's a challenge to honour what we learned and also move forward. Many people in the room related to this – some having also been the mentor. At one point one of the interveners was leaving...really leaving the mentor and then turned back and embraced him. The audience was very split over whether or not this was 'hopeful'. Its so easy to fall back into the trap....although maybe it's the embrace that gives us the power to move forward.

Board Treasurer - Standing behind V, arms over her, hands down and wide open, mouth open, shouting:

make the decision to take the money;
We're running out of time;
What's wrong with you?

The investigation here turned into a practical conversation about defying one's Board of Directors. There were a lot of activists in the room who related to this. Are we prepared to give up our position, our job, our financial security....forge out on our own...start again....perhaps it depends on age, yes?....energy.

Mother - bent over almost in a crouch, arms across body, face screwed up, eyes shut:

Give up the dream;
It's too late;
Nobody's going to listen to you anyway.

A very powerful voice, as Mom voices often are. I'll share that the woman playing the Mom said at the end that playing the Mom (who she realized was HER OWN Mom) gave her insights into her own Mother's fears and why she was saying what she was saying to her daughter.

Insights audience members mentioned:

It feels so real to take these voices and personify them.

It helped me understand my mom.

There's hope in recognizing the fears are others' voices and finding ways to deal with them.

There's hope in finding compassion for yourself and others and finding joy (comfort) in difficult situations.

Intergenerational dialogue is the key.
 Identifying and facing the fears is less scary than feeling them.
 Important to give ourselves permission to voice our opinions.

Saturday, April 2, 2016

Partners:

Theatre for Living – self organized

Venue: Dance Centre
 Capacity: 100 – (really 140 but we blocked off 40 seats)
 Attendance 79 % of House: 79%

A nice house for closing although they scared me off the top...they started really quiet. I kind of 'called them on it' saying I knew it was Saturday Night and that often meant a 'theatre crowd'...they really needed to loosen up. This got a good laugh....this and the pushing warm-up did the trick.

Cheryl's story (titled: Father Dearest) involves her father who has dementia and other illnesses and is dying. Cheryl is sitting in her bedroom, looking out the window and thinking about him. He committed "transgressions" when she was 14 – she never named them – transgressions that changed her relationship with him and with herself. Her decision is about whether or not she can see him and forgive him before he dies...or not.

Mom – lying on the floor

Don't do this, you'll die;
 Its too much stress;
 You can't handle it – its hopeless.

Older sister – her hands over Cheryl's mouth and throat:
 Be quiet and stay quiet;
 Stay silent and suppress everything;
 If you say something you'll destroy this family.

Dad – behind her, his hands pressing down on her shoulders:
 Stay just where you are;
 Don't do anything;
 You've kept quiet all this time, don't change.

There was a great deal of emotion in this story and exploration for the entire audience. They voted for this story overwhelmingly. A lot of powerful things happened on the stage but not only am I

exhausted, I have to get up REALLY early (for me right now) to be at the Concrete Day of Action Planning at around 9AM tomorrow.

So....here are insights from the audience at the end (notated by Dorothy):

There's hope in the liberation of forgiving.

There's hope in the courage to give ourselves permission to tell the truth.

There's hope in vulnerability.

It's essential to hear stories so that we don't feel alone in our fears.

There's hope in recognizing that the voices originate in someone else, not me.

Transparency can lead to a dialogue about where hope is.

I didn't realize how passive I was and now I feel I don't need to be so afraid.

There's hope in knowing we can modulate the volume of the critical voices inside us.

Like in many events...there is hope in allowing one's self to be comfortable in the discomfort.

One of the many people who came to me after with thanks and comments about the power of the evening, was one of the women from Seattle who are asking me to do the Keynote Address for an upcoming Drama Therapy Conference. She brought her whole family and they were completely blown away. She was beside herself. A nice way to finish.

Also an anecdote. The man who played Dad chatted with me BEFORE the event and had come to a project with the LGBTQ community sometime in the 90's and wanted me to know that attending that event and knowing this kind of theatre was happening here was one of the reasons he chose to move to Vancouver!

And on that note.....Good night.

Sunday, April 3, 2016

Day of Concrete Action Planning

It's two days later now. I made a point of really trying to take the 4th OFF – I am writing on the 5th.



The Day of Concrete Action Planning (DoCAP) was borne from a knowledge that the Reclaiming Hope events would create personal change for people (this is really important) but not necessarily focus into collective, systemic change. Would it be possible to facilitate a day-long workshop, bringing people who had been at Reclaiming Hope events together, to plan concrete and collective actions?

Because we had the Dance Centre already we chose to hold the day there. We hired Kevin Millsip, Co-founder of Check Your Head, Get Your Vote On, Past Vancouver School Board Trustee, and currently co-founder and Director of Next Up to facilitate the day. Kevin is also the President of Theatre for Living's Board of Directors. The DoCAP was billed as a full-day (10 AM to 6PM) FREE workshop, with a catered lunch. People had to register to attend.

37 people attended, plus the Tfl Staff and Kevin. We had invited politicians. City Councilor Andrea Reimer was the only one who came, and did so directly from the airport having flown in from Ottawa! She also attended the event at Heartwood Café.

The "agenda":

Introduction – Kevin

Kevin outlined the day and general timings.

Who's in the room? – David D. and David N.

David D did a circle intro, asking people to stand and then sit based on shared current residence, birth place, issues of interest; David N did an exercise asking people to move closer or further from each other based on things that were important to them.

Facilitating groups of interest – Kevin

This was the moment that got complicated. We had conceived of the groups being formed out of issues that arose from the RH events. When Kevin opened the floor up for people to yell issues of interest and make a list, the suggestions got wider and wider and wider. In Kevin's words, it 'went sideways'. The solution to this became to offer everything on the lists, but limit people to VOTING for only 3 items on the list. If people wanted, all 3 votes could go to one item. This actually eliminated many of the issues that had NOT risen up out of the RH events and created 7 groups (see below).

Kevin used a "Sea of Change" process that stepped the groups through identifying core issues, goals, obstacles and ways to overcome the obstacles, and then concrete actions. Kevin has written a final report, below.

I think the day was more successful for some groups than for others – as would be expected. A terrific initiative came from the "forgiveness" group. This was two women (one First Nations and the other not) to create a "Reconciliation Choir" to meet once a month and have people from diverse backgrounds learn and sing each other's songs. This is such a powerful and elegant idea that doesn't talk ABOUT Reconciliation issues but DOES it at a human, interconnected, spiritual level. I understand there are already moves to make this real.

The Racism group determined it would create a short video, featuring people working on and living issues of racism in Vancouver.

The Internalized Misogyny / Misogyny/Climate change group is forming a youth group (all youth welcome). The starting point will be discussions around murdered and missing Indigenous women.

Others didn't fare so well. The Environmental issues group got completely bogged down. I went to visit them at one point, knowing they were having trouble even agreeing on a focus. They were trying to find a way to rescue the whole environment with one action – to “save the world”. When I cautioned them against this, saying it was a path to paralysis, one of the group responded that she just wanted the action to be ‘bigger’....‘larger’...more encompassing. We went around in circles about this for a while. I know Kevin also struggled with the same thing with the group. In the end, one can't do all the work for the group. They got more and more frustrated – they just couldn't agree on things. They started off as four people and at the end of the day, there was one woman left – the one who had told me she wanted the action to be ‘bigger’.

David Ng, Outreach Coordinator, writes:

“While initially after the community tour of Reclaiming Hope we were skeptical about the Day of Concrete Action Planning, the results from the day were really great. The initial skepticism came from the fact that the majority of stories that were offered, were interpersonal stories, that were not overtly related to the macro political issues. However, the workshop process really articulated a core philosophy of ours that we ironically overlooked in our initial skepticism – that the macro political issues are fundamentally linked to the personal. The personal is political.

We had 37 people attend the Day of Concrete Action Planning, plus the 5 TfL Staff, and a variety of very concrete actions came out of the events, including:

- From a group on “Forgiveness”: A Reconciliation Choir
- From a group on “Racism”: A campaign featuring people of colour and allies, to create an educational video about racism, discrimination, and lateral violence
- From a group on “Internalized Misogyny and Climate Change”: establishing a youth group to address violence against women.
- From a group on “Getting Comfortable with the Uncomfortable”: A Facebook group to further explore and discuss “getting comfortable with being uncomfortable” and regular meditations around discomfort
- From a group on “Distribution of Wealth (Riches beyond Economics)”: Policy recommendations and report writing for decision makers, and a letter writing campaign.”

At the end of the day many of the participants spoke, some of them quite emotionally, about the power of the whole project and the day. That Reclaiming Hope was also contained (once again) in such a diverse group of people, from such broad and different interests, able to come together - the only thing some of them had in common was coming to a Reclaiming Hope event – and share

very intimate stories, hopes, fears, desires....work together as groups...and plan even a small concrete action.

Kevin Millsip's Report on the Day of Concrete Action Planning

I agree with David's previous comments about how the day went, I'll add thoughts from my lens.

As we all worked together before the actual day to plan it out, I was concerned that those coming to participate would only have two things in common:

1. Something had compelled each of them to attend an event called 'Reclaiming Hope'.
2. They had been touched enough, or intrigued enough, or something, to want to spend a full day in an event called 'Concrete action planning' - in other words something had been struck in them from the theatre event they had attended to come to a day that they knew nothing about, other than what it was called, this requires courage.
3. Each person would come into the day with their own frame on what we would be tackling, what might transpire and what the outcomes might be.

Most of my work is with people who are all attached to the same organization or campaign/project - meaning they share some values and goals around outcomes. This does make moving to action planning easier as everyone in the room is compelled to engage in moving some kind of idea/goal ahead. They often enter the workshop with some kind of overall goal in mind. We didn't have that advantage in this case, which made planning for our event a more interesting challenging. My strategy was to design a process that was both open enough that any issue could be taken through it and staged/sequenced enough so that a given idea/issue could go from idea to action using the steps in the process. I felt both good about our plan for the day and uncertain, ultimately, about where we would land by the day's end.

In addition, those who came to the Day all had attended different Reclaiming Hope events, meaning the issue they explored would have been different and therefore their goals, even broadly defined, about what they might want to accomplish would be just as diverse.

We started the day a bit late, which we had planned for in our timing, so late was really closer to being on time as we waited for people to arrive.

The first three activities took less time than I had thought so by the time we got to the issues brainstorm we were actually 'on time.' As David mentioned above, the issue brainstorm very quickly went into the realm of the non-concrete, people were putting forward ideas, many of which were more like states of being, or emotional approaches, or values struggles, than 'issues' that could be worked on. During the brainstorm I had an 'oh crap' moment as the magnitude of the 'universe' of action being called upon by the group became clear. After a quick break and conversation amongst the planning team I went with having people vote for issues, which got us

down to a more workable list. Even though some of these issues were still big like 'Forgiveness', we did land on some good project ideas.

During the main strategy planning exercise, the Sea of Change, (note: this activity comes from popular educators in the global south. When I was taught it, back in 1999, I was told it had come from activists in Latin America. I don't know for certain which country, I think Chile). The metaphor we were using, a sea of change, was a nice connection to the image on the Reclaiming Hope banner and I mentioned that although we were coming from different places, this was a boat, that literally we are all in together.

The Sea of Change activity itself goes through some predictable phases, at the beginning the energy is usually high as people are excited about using the tool and also I think feel some liberation, and perhaps silliness, as using pieces of coloured paper and drawing out a river and lakes and a sea as if they were in grade school. It's rare that we give ourselves permission, as adults, to use our creativity in the same kinds of ways we did as kids with the same kinds of tools which can foster creative thinking. It's one reason I thought this activity might be helpful for our task.

We started by having people write sentences about issues in their communities connected to their topic. They then shared those sentences and placed them in 'Lakes of Injustice'. From there, they brainstormed a list of possible goals, framed around the questions of, if your issue was addressed, or tackled in your community, how would you know? What would be different? What would be an indicator of success? From there they identified some goals that might work and place those goals in the 'Sea of Change' - which is where they ultimately want to work back from.

In the middle of the activity, where people are generating lists of potential obstacles to the goals they have come up with and then resources to overcome those obstacles, the energy generally drops and people start to feel a bit down, it's a natural part of the cycle. That said, it had been some years since I had used this particular planning activity and many of the ebbs and flows of the activity only came back to me in the particular moment of facilitation. This can be a challenging realization process. :)

Funny side note - as I was preparing for our day I found an outline of the sea of change on an activist planning website from a group in the US. The outline on the site was the very one I had written out in about 2000, to give to a group in Ontario. It's funny how things sometimes return to us.

Anyway, as we moved through the activity, for most groups, the energy shifted again as people then entered into some very specific, and in my opinion, potentially powerful project ideas. David has listed them, above, so I won't repeat them here.

A word on the group that struggled: early in the process I went to work with them and it was clear from the outset that the four of them were coming from very different places. A couple of them wanted to work on something on a grand scale, at a meta level. I get that impulse. We talked about the need to take the bigger dream and distill it down to something they could actually see

happening in their community, that way they could develop a pathway to that goal that builds on something concrete, instead of the bigger thing. I think in general many of us struggle with this - for example we must alter our path regarding our collective use of fossil fuels, yet the task is so immense that it must be broken down into goals and tactics on multiple fronts. I returned to this group several times over the day and it was clear that they were not making progress. Two of them ended up leaving before we wrapped. I think part of the challenge was the personalities in the group, the fact that the goal of 'the environment' very broad, and that they came in with such different ideas of what to do. One of the group members mentioned to me at one point she didn't know how to frame a goal, as she didn't see herself as part of a community. I could have spent more time with that group, much more time, but at some point, from my experience in that kind of circumstance, I go from facilitator to group member, and that's not helpful as there isn't really buy-in to the idea if I'm so involved.

One thing I might change if we were planning this again would be to have table facilitators, one for each group. These would be people, perhaps some Theatre for Living staff could have done this, who I would meet with before hand to go over the planning process. They would in turn become table facilitators supporting each group through their respective processes. Not all the groups needed such a role, but I do think two of them could have benefited from it.

I also think that how we planned the different activities, a blend of Theatre for Living work allowing the small groups to express something powerful and emotional and then see those expressions was a really great combination with the actually planning work we did at the tables. They were very complimentary.

A couple more pictures (there are some inside the writing ;))



Finding 'the moment'. Photo: Tim Matheson



working with the Voices of Fear. Photo: Tim Matheson