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SALVATION ARMY

HOPE IN THE CITY
BREAKFAST

“A Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste”

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Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre



Hope in the City Breakfast

Good morning and welcome to the 5th annual “Hope in the City” Breakfast. In its few years this breakfast has become an important event for our community—coming as it does at a time when those of us who are predisposed to be hopeful focus on our blessings while those among us who find themselves living without hope can easily slip even further into their own private and painful worlds.

It is the purpose of this annual breakfast, sponsored by The Salvation Army, to ensure that the fragile lifeline so many in our community rely upon is strengthened by our commitment to those among us who daily need and benefit from our help.

I want to say a few words this morning on behalf of all of us in the room—the many dedicated business leaders and the many compassionate and caring service providers—words I hope will send us away to our day reflecting on the importance of hope, of sustained commitment to community. I want to focus on why, in these particularly challenging times, we need to redouble our efforts to doing what we can and all we can for one another regardless of our role in this beautiful city—our home—Vancouver.

My comments are predicated on the notion that “A Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste,” an idea many are articulating at present.

And while the entire developed world is struggling to understand how it could be that our collective good times have come crashing down around us, plunging corporations and individuals into shock and disbelief about the loss of “financial value” we are currently experiencing, in behind that reality is an even more important conversation—how could this have happened?

How could our “values” have become so lopsided that important institutions we count on to keep our world economy in balance were so focused on one value, financial greed that we find ourselves in a crisis of unprecedented proportions—a crisis still unfolding around us?

Questions are and will be asked and lest we waste this crisis, we are asking those same questions of ourselves, what are our values? And what do we need to learn from this? And hopefully, apply to our own lives.

What do we care about? Are our daily actions reflective of our deeper, broader human values? What can we, what should we learn from this, beyond the folly of leveraging packaged sub prime mortgages? And the added folly of investing in things neither we nor the people selling them to us can understand?

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We are a unique community here in Vancouver in many ways. One of the things that makes us so unique, and it is a function of size perhaps, but more likely intellectual curiosity, is we like to get together in rooms like this on a regular basis and hear from leaders, often “outsiders” and enter into conversations about what we learn from them and how to apply those ideas to our circumstances.

These rooms are increasingly filled, as they are this morning, with “previously ungroupable groups of people”—CEO’s, business owners large and small, non-governmental organizations, not for profits, and government.

We each bring our own perspectives to issues and together develop the “hidden wiring” of critical connections that allow us to build consensus about our issues, and to engage in new partnerships to address them. This language, “hidden wiring” is new to me, however, the notion is abundant in this community as exhibited by just the makeup in this one room. People in partnerships formal and informal.

Over the years, world leaders find their way, by invitation, to Vancouver. This year alone we have gathered in rooms to hear from:

- ◆ Rudy Giuliani, who effected a dramatic turn-around in his city; finding homes and futures for thousands of New Yorkers and making that city a safer place to live and visit;
- ◆ Philip Mangano, the wonderfully creative and passionate US homeless czar, who spoke to us of the importance of the role of business leaders in solving homelessness and gave us examples across North America of successes we could learn from;
- ◆ Senator Michael Kirby, an advocate for bringing mental illness out of the closet in Canada and the author of the most comprehensive study ever undertaken on the subject in Canada;
- ◆ philanthropist Frank Giustra, who spoke about why the growing gap between rich and poor cannot be allowed to continue in the world; lest it put us all at peril and about what he personally and others in the mining industry are doing about it;
- ◆ President Bill Clinton, who talked about a new definition of citizenship, and
- ◆ most recently the Aga Khan, who has been inspiring his followers and others for decades with his message of “leadership and love and giving.”

They have come here and we have assembled in large numbers to learn from these remarkable “thought leaders.”

What they have in common with one another, is they all have taken their place in contemporary history as leaders in the critical societal issues we find ourselves grappling with here at home in Vancouver today—issues such as addiction, mental illness, homelessness, street crime, and deteriorating civility.

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This October the Business Council of British Columbia—the organization I represent—and an association of the largest employers in British Columbia, from all sectors and all geographic regions— assembled to discuss Corporate Responsibility and to share with one another the various and myriad ways the business community is involved in community development and sustainability.

Prior to this Summit “Investing Today for Tomorrow” we undertook a survey of our members to determine the nature and extent of their Corporate Responsibility activities.

We learned that British Columbia business leaders saw their role in healthy and sustainable communities as part of doing business, that their commitment was non-negotiable (their clients, customers, and employees all expected it of them); that it provided them with a “social license” to operate and that they saw it today as growing in importance, anticipating that in a few years it will be even more important in their daily operations than it is today.

At the Summit, CEO’s from industries as diverse as telecommunications, financial services, mining, energy, and oil and gas, shared their corporate and often personal experiences in integrating community well being into their business models, their employee engagement programs, and their public reporting.

They committed to coming together in 2009 to learn more from one another and to share best practices. These activities and commitments are well beyond corporate philanthropy—these are a seismic shift to shared problem-solving—these are deep partnerships between business and NGO’s and government, working with common values toward common goals for the betterment of our communities.

The highlight of the day was perhaps the luncheon where we heard from Premier Gordon Campbell, local mining philanthropist Frank Giustra and former President Bill Clinton.

Premier Campbell reminded us that Corporate Responsibility was a new name for an old idea—good citizenship—and he stressed the gift we each have—that of living in Canada where citizens can together shape their future by the actions we choose to take together.

He reminded us that our futures are dramatically intertwined and that without working together we will fall far short for those who come after us.

Frank’s message to the room was “if you bring to bear an industry (as he has done with mining) or even companies to address a social issue and you do that in partnership with others, like government and non-profit groups and community leaders, than your chances of succeeding are going to be far greater than trying to do this “stuff” on your own.”

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President Clinton said that as an outsider to Vancouver he thinks Vancouver and British Columbia a “perfect” place for these innovations, as a diverse community, outward looking geographically and a vital place full of entrepreneurs who get things done for a living.

President Clinton spoke about the importance of thinking beyond the strength of the economy in deciding if you commit to solving problems local or international—he said “to do this based on the condition of the economy in his opinion, misses the point, which is that we have to redefine citizenship in the 21st century including corporate citizenship. It used to be enough to work every day and take care of your family, pay your taxes and show up periodically and vote.”

He argues we need to add another element to the very idea of citizenship in an interdependent world.

And that idea is philanthropy. I quote:

“If we have a little money, we can give it; if we have a little time, we can give it. We can’t escape each other for good or ill—therefore anything we can do to invest in having more good and less ill, will benefit our companies, our mission, our reputations, our good will.

We cannot crawl in a hole and forget about the rest of the world, even in tough times, they are our future.”

I quote again,

“Whatever happens, we must appreciate how fortunate we are relative to many people in the world. Now is not the time to stop giving!”

I want to interject a note at this point about “how fortunate we are” lest we forget and in these harrowing economic times it would be easy enough to lose this perspective.

Every year, Mercer, the consulting firm, undertakes a worldwide survey of cities based on the “Best Quality of Living,” using a series of measurements, including social and political stability, economic environment, health, education, cultural environment, recreation, public services, housing and the natural environment. Cities are rated numerically.

And every year this city—our city—Vancouver, comes up in the top four in the world! The only cities that ever rate higher are Zurich, Geneva, and in 2008, Vienna. In the Americas (North, Central, and South) Vancouver comes up FIRST! Similar surveys undertaken by “The Economist” magazine put Vancouver at the top of the list. In the world!

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And yet, there are those among us in Vancouver who do not enjoy the benefits of a superior quality of life as we in this room do.

I want to change gears and to say a few words about our host's today—the Salvation Army. Founded in 1887 by William Booth, “The Army” or “The Sally Ann,” as it is affectionately known, operates all over the world providing compassionate caring and services to those who need it most. “The Army” is active in 39 communities in British Columbia alone, helping families, children, the ill, the homeless, and the elderly, those without hope, to find a meal, a bed, or a new way of life.

Over 1,000,000 meals are served annually and over 1,000 housing units and beds provide services to the homeless, the addicted, women and children fleeing abusive relationships, and the elderly and dying.

They are the largest of our many fine, not-for-profit, organizations here in Vancouver with an unwavering commitment to the lost and lonely.

Where we may call the social issues of the day homelessness, mental illness, and addiction, they know them as Ray, Suzanne and Darlene. Ironically, their slogan in the ads they are currently running in Vancouver is “We see what most don’t.”

I say, ironically, because just this past weekend there was an article in the Vancouver Sun, by Peter McKnight, that said that this is sadly true—we do not see them, at least not as human.

Research undertaken at Princeton, with the more than a little alarming title, “Dehumanizing the lowest of the low,” revealed that when people were shown photographs of drug addicts and homeless people the part of the brain that was activated was the part that became active when they were shown pictures of objects, cars, buildings, etc.

The subjects of the research were literally objectifying the most marginalized people among us as non-human and were emotionally responding to them or not responding to them, thusly.

When the Salvation Army says “we see what most don’t,” they are, regrettably, right.

So, back to this crisis we are all experiencing—how can we ensure we do not waste it?

The question we need to ask ourselves is, “What can we do, to ensure that we see those around us who need our help, and then respond to the sick and lost in our beautiful city?”

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To do what William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania said several centuries ago:

“If there is any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now; and not deter or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again.”

We can leave here today willing to see what is “ill” around us; we can reach out in the various ways we are able to lend our assistance; we can work in partnership with others in our community who know what needs to be done; we can give our money and our time and most importantly, we can show our leadership, our resolve, our commitment to making our city—our home—our Vancouver, a better place for all who live in it.

And while these social issues have always been with us, perhaps today we can resolve to finding the way to end them.

I would like to wrap up this morning with a couple of perspectives. First, the last recorded words of William Booth, spoken in 1912 in London, on the occasion of his 83rd birthday, a poem entitled,

“While Women Weep.”

While women weep,
As they do now,
I’ll fight;
While little children go hungry,
As they do now,
I’ll fight;
While men go to prison, in and out,
In and out,
As they do now,
I’ll fight;
While there is a poor lost girl upon the streets,
While there remains one dark soul without the light of God,
I’ll fight—
I’ll fight to the very end!”

And for those of you who prefer your inspiration on the lighter side, I will close this morning with the lyrics by Irving Berlin from his memorable seasonal musical “White Christmas. So, may I sing for you, “Counting Your Blessings.”



“Counting your Blessings”

“When I’m worried and I can’t sleep
I count my blessings instead of sheep
And I go to sleep
Counting my Blessings.”

When my bankroll is getting small
I think of when I had none at all
And I go to sleep
Counting my Blessings”

I think about a nursery
And I picture curly heads
And one by one I count them
As they slumber in their beds”

So, if you’re worried, and you can’t sleep
Just count your Blessings
Instead of sheep
And you’ll fall asleep
Counting your Blessings.”

Thank you all for being here this morning. Thank you to the Salvation Army for always being here. And very best wishes to you all at this, the most hopeful time of year.

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December 4, 2008