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Red Deer Community Members Cultivating Creative Hub

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Navigating the Realm of Co-Creation: A Conversation with Paul Harris

RED DEER CANADA - Paul Harris is animating community as a convenor, coach, author and artist. He hails from Red Deer, Alberta, where Nora Smith and a small group of generative journalism practitioners are pursing an inquiry into the ways in which a creative hub is being cultivated there, by community members.

In this generative interview, Nora and Paul explore the process of co-creation, our identities in that work, and the how the definition of a community includes more than the people in it.

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Who are you and why is it important that you are here?

Well, those are good questions aren’t they? I’m a composite of relationships I’m in with people and places, things, activities, and ideas. That’s who I am.

And why is it important that you are here?

Because I care about you Nora.

What if our community were a creative hub that was distinct and connected? When did you start caring about this concept and why does it matter to you?

First, I would say that this ‘What If’ question is a little grating because it suggests that we’re not a creative hub. I think we are a very creative hub already, as most communities are. They’re always generating something new, which then become artifacts of relationships they are in. There’s always something creative happening.

Image

Paul Harris

That is the nature of humanity - we're always in the mode of creating something. This is the thing that most of us don't understand but which happens continually. We are in the process of co-creating through our conversations with one another and by creating physical things. The things we say, write and do, these are all creative processes. All of which are co-creations, but not just 'co' as in two but as in multiple people, multiple places, multiple ideas and activities — and in the interplay among them. That process of creation is what makes us human to start with. We stop being who we are the second we stop creating because we can't exist in the world without creating something every moment.

What excites you most about this?

I'd like people to understand that we are in the process of co-creating all the time and that our identities are composites of the relationships or the co-creations that

we’re enacting in every given moment. Many of us believe that we have total control over our lives —who we want to become, who we are today — that there’s some authentic core inside us that we can just reach into and become. This is what holds us back from doing the co-creation that we really need to do in the world, because we think that we’re individuals and self-contained.

As soon as we realize that we are not individuals — that there’s no such thing as an autonomous individual — but rather we are a composite of the people and other relationships we are in, then we become open to the idea that it’s really important to be thoughtful about we say and do with others because we’re creating artifacts that continue to influence who we will become and who the community will become. It’s about becoming aware not to float through our conversations, not only with people but with spaces, with ideas, and with life. I’m excited that that is a possibility! Maybe we can shift the paradigm from being individual beings to relational beings.

At what crossroads do you find yourself with what matters most to you?

I am taking the work that I’ve been putting into practice for so many years and now spending time writing the theories and ideas out more fully. I’m hoping that I can get these ideas out into the world. I also do identity coaching now around what it means to be relational. I’m excited about that! That is the crossroads I am at; shifting my focus from building physical artifacts that continue to give — such as businesses and buildings — to being much more focused on coaching and trying to offer these ideas to other people so they can, hopefully, grasp something that’s new that might help reshape the world.

What would you like to experience as you go about this work?

Well it’s interesting because theoretically when I try to talk about this work from an academic perspective, I lose people really quickly. We are stuck. We are raised in this individualistic paradigm. We learn to think right from kindergarten onward that we can be and do whatever we want. I’m hoping that we can shift away from that and start to see the world in a slightly different way.

If I can help others see this in a useful way, they may realize the great potential they have to influence the world but also realize how the world is influencing them. It's partly about happiness; we can become happier people if we see that we are relationally tied? I don't know that we see that now. I don't think that a lot of people see that dynamic day-to-day. We may think instinctively that yes, we should smile at people on the street because that's good for them and it's good for us. Yet we don't really think that, if we smile at others on the street, we change that person's life whether they want to be changed or not. We don't think that way. Nor do we think, if that person looks at me and smiles, that our lives are being changed beyond our ability to resist it. We don't make those connections and yet that is what happens every day through all of our interactions. You can test that theory out anytime by just being miserable sometime at a bank. We influence everything, and are influenced.

What do you think is the courage needed to travel in that direction?

Not so much courage. Again, it goes back to the relational thing. Courage feels like a very inward-focused idea — something that we look inside ourselves to find. From a relational perspective, what has to happen is that we will need to surround ourselves with people, things, ideas that will take us in a courageous direction. That's courageous, to trust in our relationship and abandon the all-knowing 'I'.

I think we forget that it's a two-way street — we don't have to do all the work! All we have to do is to activate the relationships that we can. For example, if you want to become a good artist, you have to start doing the work, start hanging around artists, start reading about the arts. Just think about all the relationships you could activate which then could take you in that direction. Your skills will change, the way you think will change. Your big superpower is that you have the ability to choose what relationships you want to activate. Then you can watch them co-create something in you and in the other that makes a difference in the long term.

What are your next steps?

Oh this year is the big hairy audacious goal of getting two books to the draft stage. One of them is an academic book about relational identity and theory. The other is a

fiction book that uses those ideas and illustrates them in a fictional, fun, and interesting way. I think it's interesting. At least my editor says it's interesting. We'll see if anybody likes it when it's done. I feel positive.

What would you like, want or need from the community to make your next steps as wonderfully successful as possible?

The word community is the nebulous piece in all of your questions because our communities are all different. How I define my community may be different from the broader one I live in or the communities of the people I associate with. My circle of friends or relationships is my community. This means that I need to work on activating those relationships that will help me move in the direction that I want to go. My goals for this year are to do this.

Support would be important when I am starting to produce things that I need feedback on; I need readers and engaging conversations with broader perspectives on things I will want to write about. Maybe the biggest thing for me is to have the willingness to activate those relationships in a way that could help me succeed.

When I talk about community, I want to be very clear that often we refer to a community as if it were a group of people. I don't think of community that way. I also think about community as places, things, ideas, and activities. Anything that's influencing us. People are only part of what makes up community identity. You have the people, but you also have the places, the activities, the ideas, and the things you surround yourself with. All of those factor into what the community looks like for me.

What, if any, meaning has been made for you during our conversation?

There's a certain sense of vulnerability when you're in a conversation with anybody because you know that you're going to be changed by the way the person is with you. You're asking me questions that are making me think, so I'm changing. I also am aware that I'm changing the person that's asking questions, in this case you. Thus, I want to be very careful about what we co-create together so that we don't do damage but also at the same time grow in the way that we think and see the world. There is a certain motivation I got from the questions asked. I'm going to look at my relationships a little more clearly and think about how I can activate them so that I can help myself move in the direction I want to go.

Identity is a weird thing because it has an inertia that comes just with being in the world. We do the same things, see the same people, say the same things sometimes based on the way we've said things in the past. That carries us in a way that causes us to continue to be the same person. If we want to do something different, we have to activate all those relationships differently. We have to choose differently. This reminds me that inertia is a terrible beast. It can keep us from our goals. But harnessing it can serve us well.

Maybe what we need to do is harness inertia in ways that, once we start our goals, take us in a positive direction. A good example of that is journaling. Once a person who doesn't journal starts, they're changing their behaviour away from letting random thoughts which can creep in and take over. They start to question, to think through things, and to begin to create different momentum. If they continue to journal, that new initiative could take them in a different direction. That's one way to think of it. A new friend is the same kind of thing; somebody that's willing to sit and be with you through things. Seeing a counselor regularly is another way. Going to a place every day that you don't usually visit is a way to change your direction and change your inertia. There is a sense of activating what is missing to create something new and better.