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Generative Images of the Future

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Twelve ways to deepen democracy where we live and work
Tuesday, January 5, 2021 -- Peter Pula

The time to move well beyond representative democracy as the way we ‘do democracy’ is well upon us. Representative democracy has been found wanting. It has become the bastion of professional politicians, and the limits of its usefulness to the every day citizen are increasingly apparent. A strong argument can be made that worse than not being particularly useful, it has ensconced us in a system in which the political and state apparatus, in its habitual pattern, actually interferes with citizenry in a detrimental way. That does not mean that it must be abandoned, but it must be transcended. We must do better. And that means proliferating

democracy into spaces where we as citizens can experience both agency and efficacy.

Deepening democracy, liberating our strengths, and cultivating peace and abundance amidst trying times … this is what I'd like to see more of…

Community Dialogue About What's Important … Everywhere

There are a lot, and I mean a lot, of important conversations for communities to have. This is a time for us to grapple with what is important to us, to become intimate with our interdependencies, make choices, exercise our freedom and agency (which can be terrifying prospect), and step up and into our power to create communities of wellbeing, peace, and abundance. I would like to see an explosion of artfully hosted community dialogues, in which people talk with one another rather than listen to someone at the front of a room, that awaken giftedness and cultivate real possibility on the ground.

Local Social Value Marketplaces

I would like to see social procurement established as a common practice in municipalities. The pandemic is reason to do this sooner rather than later. It holds promise as a powerful way to leverage local assets as a response to what is coming. Municipal governments are best to lead the way as their mandates are already directed at the wellbeing of their local communities. All other anchor institutions in a given locality — colleges, universities, school boards, public health, hospitals, government departments — by joining in and being in conversation with one another ignite local decision making, problem solving, and possibility.

Non-Profits Become Enterprising

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Current funding models are colonial. I would like to see non-profits become enterprising in a way that they solve social problems and garner revenue commensurate with the real value of having addressed those social problems and

possibilities. Non-profits are in the best position of all of our institutions to do so. A step in the direction of becoming ‘enterprising’ will be facilitated by the anchor institutions in their communities embracing social procurement practices.

Did you know that non-profits are exempt from otherwise compulsory competitive bidding rules? That means, for example, a municipality has it completely within their power to contract with a non-profit to deliver services they already purchase like, say, catering, cleaning, or groundskeeping. They could also be an anchor customer to a new enterprise to employ people on the margins in say, a mattress recycling operation. They could do so directly and without the requirement of a competitive bidding process. That means the social, cultural, environmental, and human capital goals a municipality might have is something they can address directly by contracting in specific ways to suit specific circumstance, strengths, and capacities.

I would like to see enterprising non-profits proliferate, and for the value they bring socially and financially, properly honoured.

Social Financiers Show Up

There might be a funding gap between when a municipality, say, hires an enterprising non-profit to get a social good done and when the results, social and financial, kick in. In Canada, for example, there are some 84 billion dollars stored up in foundations that could be applied to that gap, at interest rates that meet the conditions of ‘minimal and reasonable’.

An Explosion of Local Democracy

There are civil society organizations everywhere; non-profits, third-sector organizations. These are a key to deepening democracy with immediate effect. There is no need to wait for a change in political election processes or laws to level up democracy. Just about every one of them is a membership organization which has a board of directors elected from its membership. Good governance is an art. I would like to see a flood of people joining these civil society organizations and a reawakening and engagement in the art of local, democratic governance. Imagine all these non-profits, now accessing a new local marketplace of millions of social procurement-borne dollars, addressing highly localized circumstances, problems and possibilities? There is so much to be gained by being ‘truly progressive’ in the sense

of participating in associational life, in community, where agency and efficacy are most likely to be experienced and enjoyed.

Fully engaged in this realm of democracy, we would be less likely to await some federal mandate to save or fix us, we would feel more connected and empowered, experience relationship with others, and find ourselves in flow. This would make us real progressives, acting locally and in ordinary ways to make a difference … and do far better than empty moralizing and absenting.

Partnerships In the Liminal Spaces

There is much life in the spaces in between — in between the silos organizations reinforce, between community members, and between community members and institutions.

We have become so enamoured with the system world that we have drained the energy out of the life world. I would like to see the system world, institutions and organizations of all sorts, step into partnership with associations and community members. There is so much more people can and want to create in their communities than we are currently bringing to life. Sometimes the limits are met early because institutions take ownership, dominate a space, make promises they ought not make or on which they cannot deliver. There is much life in the spaces in between — in between the silos organizations reinforce, between community members, and between community members and institutions.

Organizations concentrate resources. Often, modest funds, people, resources, to support citizens who ask for it and in the way they ask for it is easy to access and grant. Imagine what would happen if members of organizations showed up at community conversations as citizens first, and then return to their organizations look around in the broom closet and budget to find what the community is asking for, and give it to them?

There are many things organizations can and must do.

There are also things organizations just can’t do. They often aren’t particularly suited to emergence, are confronted with all kinds of internal processes, teams of skittish lawyers and the like. What if a new fifth column formed? What if people ‘on the inside’ fell quietly in league with ‘pirates’ or ‘free-rangers’ … community members who can do what they can’t. Sprinkle a little fairy dust, a wink and a nod, and watch the magic happen.

We Buy from the ‘Little Guy’

I don’t know about you, but I have found that the small shops I’ve visited during the pandemic for everything from groceries to house plants have been as, and most often more, stringent in their adherence to occupancy limits and physical distancing. I have also found the patrons of small shops to generally have been more attentive to public health guidance than what I’ve seen in the big shops. I have experienced more physical distancing in the few restaurants I’ve visited than I did at, for example, Costco and by far. Shutdowns have clearly benefited the ‘big boys’. Now it’s time for the ‘little guys’ to have their turn. Lockdowns rules ought to reflect that

intention.

It’s time for our governments to learn how to buy from the little guy too. If governments want to be ‘innovative’ they can embrace the idea that it is the small nimble outfits who are more likely to deliver, on the whole, more diversity and innovation. There is no need to come up with massive one-size-fits-all answers, control the process, and award contracts to a ‘prestigious firm and supplier of record’.

And, if you can pay your bills quickly, the smaller firm will jump through hoops to make things work for you. Let’s give the little guy a try.

An Increase in, and Celebration of, Employee Ownership

Employee ownership does not necessarily mean an organization becomes consensus driven to an inane degree. Healthy hierarchy and personal choice still make natural sense in the ecology of things. That being said, I would very much like to see an increase in employee ownership. It is well known that employee-owned firms, or firms that create value ‘for the benefit of employees’ perform better than other forms of organization on profitability, longevity, safety, retention, and community commitment. They are far less likely to sell to venture capital firms for eventual proffering into the stock market. They generally stay put and don’t sell, and when they do, the employees get to choose, and face the implications and receive the benefit of their choice.

Why not sell your firm to employees rather than to absentee owners? Turn in, instead of out. It can be complex, but there are good people who can show you how.

More Organizations Operate More “Democratically”

I’ve already mentioned that I’d like to see, in 2021, a movement to democratize income (in the sense of being reasonable and quite a bit more equitable), *ownership*, and *governance*. Something that could be done without changing the way any of the money works is to democratize how we operate our organizations day-to-day. I would like to see a shift in which managers convene, host, and connect their teams in such a way as to encourage choice, agency, and efficacy. Rather than decide, direct, and recruit buy-in, I would love to see leaders become participatory.

Every organization is a context. That context sets a shared purpose. From there, we either trust people or we don’t and the structures of interaction we design reveal which it is. With context and purpose set, and agreement to join in on that mandate, every person has something unique to offer. I would like to see people in organizations learn to host one another in such a way as to discover that unique gift each has to offer, what those gifts together make possible, and to cultivate movement in that direction.

I can imagine cooperatives, employee-owned firms, and non-profits creating media everyday about what people are doing in their midst to move towards their preferred futures.

Imagine what life we could unleash in our workplaces if we took off the bridle and bit.

Generative Journalism Takes Root

I would like to see Generative Journalism take root in organizations, associations, and communities as way to cultivate change in the direction of people's preferred futures. It's an approach to discovering the stories and emerging futures alive for people who together make up an organization, association, or community. It is a strengths-based, appreciative approach that honours each person. This makes it fundamentally and deeply democratic. It is also attuned to emergence and therefore is always new, news. *It cuts away* from the institutional narratives that have become lifeless and very often disingenuous. *It cuts to* the stories of the people who make up the organizations, associations, and communities in which we work and live. It is an *addition* to community journalism and a *life-giving alternative* to conventional corporate communication.

A Generative News Network

I would like to see a collaborative network of generative news organizations come to life. I can imagine cooperatives, employee-owned firms, and non-profits creating media everyday about what people are doing in their midst to move towards their preferred futures. I can imagine local, trans-local, and even international news purveyors of these and other sorts cooperating with each other to circulate stories and shift the narrative we are living into.

A Shift in News Narrative

I would like to watch as broadcasters and newspapers lead with stories illuminating where all the things I'd like to see are actually happening. I'd like to see the winding down of the narrative of 'big' and of the 'chattering classes' and the ramping up of stories about how deepening democracy is manifesting in ways like the ones I've mentioned.

That'd be a year of progress.

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