

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.—PROVERB, ORIGIN UNKNOWN

CHAPTER 13

A NEW NARRATIVE

AFTER MORE THAN FORTY YEARS, WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT New Dawn? What are the organization's essential features? First, New Dawn is distinguished by its preoccupation with the community's depletion and the understanding that only a comprehensive response will be effective. This perspective places the organization in what the literature refers to as the progressive tradition. Second, New Dawn is a movement, and like every movement it is essentially a learning and educational event. Third, through its experience New Dawn has developed a particular understanding of effective leadership. Its approach is different from the heroic ideal, which many institutions still find attractive. According to that model, organizations are by nature hierarchical and must be directed by one individual who is provided with a mandate to impose their will on all aspects of the organization. Finally, New Dawn's ultimate aspiration is that the community move beyond an old restrictive and limiting narrative and toward a new narrative that is inclusive and enabling.

NEW DAWN AS A PROGRESSIVE ORGANIZATION

According to J. Fontan's 1993 book, *A Critical Review of Canadian, American, and European Community Economic Development Literature*, voluntary organizations focusing on community underdevelopment tend to fall into one of two categories: liberal (small l), or progressive. From the liberal perspective, the problem of underdevelopment is person-centred. Accordingly, the way to deal with depletion is to extend the boundaries of the existing system to reach those not included. For example, government agencies or organizations funded by the government that deliver services to the poor are not in the business of community change. Rather, their work is dispensing services to those who have fallen between the cracks. According to this methodology, the problem is the person, not the system. This approach is well embedded in the dominant culture, which in turn is rooted in what Walter Brueggemann called the royal consciousness in his 2018 book, *The Prophetic Imagination*—that is, a consciousness which is pleased with and supportive of the status quo and resistant to the call for change.

For progressive organizations like New Dawn, however, the existing system is inadequate. The community's depletion represents a compelling call for an alternative culture and new consciousness. New Dawn's work is about imagining and acting on initiatives that move us toward cultural change. For example, in the 1970s the community was suffering from an insufficient supply of dentists, a difficulty which spoke of the systemic failing of the existing system. In response, New Dawn imagined and implemented a remedy to overcome the problem while at the same time demonstrating the community's ability to help itself. Also, New Dawn's most recent development, the Convent Cultural Centre, serves to support, celebrate, and nurture the community's exceptional creative capacity.

NEW DAWN AS A LEARNING EVENT

New Dawn is a social movement, and like all such movements it is essentially an educational event. Not education in the traditional sense, rather education in a transformation sense or the education of the heart. That is, the process of becoming critically aware of the restrictive impact of one's history and culture. New Dawn's dream is that the community not only learns the skills relevant to development, and not only comes to comprehend the systems leading to its depletion, but most importantly overcomes the disempowering self-concepts which stand as impediments to development. Charles Turner, the British scholar, advises that there are five development principles associated with underdevelopment and poverty. Though his context is the conditions and circumstances of African Americans, his themes speak to the Cape Breton experience and to New Dawn's path. Using Turner's framework but language more familiar to New Dawn, the principles relevant to the organization include freedom, conversation/dialogue, identity, competence, and action/reflection.

FREEDOM

The most basic principle of human development is freedom. According to Turner, freedom assumes the confidence to "stand out" or to "take a stand." As noted in the first chapter, my grandmother proudly proclaimed my grandfather did not stand out, and she advised that I do the same. At some level, she understood that Cape Bretoners had been deemed incapable of leading themselves, and so were dependent on others considered more qualified.

Several years ago a colleague living in Cape Breton, but born and raised off-Island, delivered a life-skills training program in a series of Cape Breton communities. One of the modules included an exercise in conflict resolution that was expected to last an hour.

On the occasion of the first program, after providing the participants with instruction on the assignment, and once the group had

begun, he stepped out of the room. Upon returning several minutes later, he discovered the group had completed the exercise. Supposing they had misunderstood the instructions, he asked that they repeat the assignment. He reiterated the instructions but changed the hypothetical conflict and this time stayed in the room.

Once again, the group quickly achieved resolution. Rather than engage in a full discussion, the participants promptly folded in behind one of the group members—a young woman new to the community whose husband had recently been transferred to the village to manage the local bank.

In every Cape Breton community where my colleague completed the program, this experience was repeated. Without fail, the group followed the lead of the person who was from away or who had been away. The exception was in Acadian villages. In each of those communities, there was a vigorous debate. As my friend noted, “they were confident enough to fight.”

From the beginning, New Dawn set its sights on organizational freedom. The organization was determined to learn to operate as a private, independent, self-sustaining, community-based organization. Even during its earliest days, when New Dawn was functioning as a small housing agency, the organization was resolute. During those times there were, on occasion, conflicts between the organization and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). When CMHC’s prescriptions attempted to direct New Dawn away from its intended destination, the organization resisted. Remember New Dawn Chair Walter MacNeil’s instruction: “Offer them the keys!” In other words, there would be no surrender.

CONVERSATION/DIALOGUE

Cape Breton has always been confused about the nature of its predicament and the way forward. But how could it be otherwise? The community has rolled from one crisis to another, while at the same

time operating in a cauldron of confusion and misunderstanding about community governance and local responsibility. One of New Dawn's foundational practices, however, has been to keep clarifying the community's circumstances and envisioning its opportunities. The main practice employed for this purpose has been conversation.

The first New Dawn conversations began at Greg MacLeod's house. It was an older house, reconfigured into two apartment units and looking out through stately old trees to the harbour. In those days, all involved, even those merely interested in what was happening, would be invited to come together for an evening. On such occasions MacLeod might begin the evening with a talk. His presentations were informal and may well have centred on the value and importance of New Dawn. As an aside, he might report that some well-known local personality had contacted him to learn more about this new kind of organization. He was always suggesting that people from all parts of the country, and sometimes from abroad, were interested in New Dawn. He pointed to the importance of our efforts and encouraged us not to be discouraged by the day-to-day difficulties.

While not an orator, MacLeod, like Coady and Tompkins, was an inspiring figure. Also like them, he enjoyed the stature of priesthood and an association with a place of higher education. His commitment and passion were contagious. He infected people with New Dawn's possibility and on that basis gathered them in. Once MacLeod took his leave, New Dawn faced the same conundrum as every social movement: how to grow and develop after the initial injection of enthusiasm and charismatic leadership? Coady had declared local people had the right and the responsibility to be masters of their own destiny. But notwithstanding the poetry of the phrase, by what means are people to continue believing, and how might they be persuaded to go on? The work and the struggle can grind down the spirit of those left behind. Over time enthusiasm is lost and the energy dissipates.

After MacLeod's departure, New Dawn began the practice of gathering people once a year for dinner and conversation. In hindsight, perhaps the unspoken aspiration was to continue with a more formal version of MacLeod's practice. As had been the case earlier, those in attendance had all manner of connections with the organization: board members, staff, founders, special guests, and interested bystanders. In the new format, the evening began with a formal presentation, a state of the union, followed by comments about current challenges and future possibilities and finally an extensive plenary discussion. Given the diversity of those assembled and the short duration of the session—four or five hours—it provided, at best, an opportunity for a beginning. The sessions, nevertheless, generated energy and excitement. New Dawn was demonstrating value and those in attendance were pleased to witness the organization's progress and eager to speak to its potential. Most importantly, these gatherings confirmed that New Dawn was an evolving experiment searching for how best to confront the community's challenges and opportunities.

Year by year, New Dawn was growing in size and complexity. It was increasingly difficult for a relatively large, diverse group to provide advice within the context of an event of such short duration. In the early 1990s, when Father McManus became board chair, he pitched the notion of an annual board retreat. There was resistance to his idea. First, there was the matter of cost. The expense would be substantial. Considering New Dawn's limited means, was such an event affordable? Second, there was concern such an occasion would mean that the directors, all of whom were volunteers, would be giving up a weekend away from their families. Third, some were anxious that such an extensive talk-a-thon would be a waste of time. As they saw it, New Dawn was already engaged in more than enough talk. It had to be more practical and get on with projects.

McManus, however, believed if New Dawn was to grow into an effective organization, those leading the organization had to develop the practice of spending time together so as to come to know and trust one another.

McManus prevailed, and New Dawn held its first planning retreat in the fall of 1994. Notwithstanding the initial resistance, the retreat has evolved into an annual event and a critical component of the organization's culture.

Typically, those in attendance now include not only the directors but also senior staff, guest speakers, and a facilitator. The session begins Thursday evening and concludes Saturday afternoon. There is a reception at the end of business on Thursday and a celebratory dinner on Friday night. The participants are encouraged to bring their partners to the social aspects of the event. The retreats are held outside of the CBRM, at a location far enough away that returning home during the session represents an inconvenience. The majority of events have been held in central Cape Breton, in the village of Iona, a peaceful setting overlooking the Bras d'Or Lakes. The abbreviated in-house name for this planning event has become "Iona," and Iona has become a critical aspect of that which sustains and energizes the organization. New Dawn would not be New Dawn without Iona.

IDENTITY

New Dawn's identity is anchored by three core values. These act as a compass enabling the organization to navigate its way forward and serve as a touchstone available at any time, but especially during turbulent moments. New Dawn's values: responsibility, faith, and hope, are embedded deep inside the organization.

Responsibility, or community responsibility, as noted in Chapter 1, was not a notion my grandmother encouraged. That possibility had been excluded from her life experience. For over a century, the community was subject to the domination of big industry and big government. Within that context, there was no room for the community. When New Dawn was launched in 1976, it was a speck in relation to the size and capacity of big government (DEVCO). Nevertheless, MacLeod was adamant that ultimately the community had to assume



From left, Sohaila Abdo, Savannah Anderson, Claire Turpin, Janine Hussey, and Mike Targett at the Iona planning session in 2018.

responsibility for itself. Henri Nouwen in his 1972 work *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* speaks of responsibility for the future this way:

For modern people life easily becomes a bow whose string is broken and from which no arrow can fly. In this dislocated state we become paralyzed.... Only when we feel ourselves responsible for the future can we have hope or despair.

Being part of New Dawn is like riding a roller coaster, experiencing both challenges and occasional success. But New Dawn is not about itself. Rather, the organization represents an invitation to the community to assume the burden and the privilege of determining its future.

The second value, faith, is important because the significance or meaning of New Dawn's work, at any particular point in time, is unknown. The organization has at best a tentative grasp of the meaning

of its present circumstances, much less its future. Only in hindsight is it possible to fathom the value of what has been achieved. Reinhold Niebuhr, the German theologian, suggests, “Nothing true or beautiful or good makes sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith.” To some, New Dawn’s development path may seem inspired; however, the organization has always been unclear about next steps. New Dawn is constantly probing through the thicket of the community’s circumstances in search of the way forward. The organization proceeds on faith and on that basis searches for that which is true, beautiful, and good.

The third value, hope, is essential to building anything positive. Throughout the Middle Ages many European communities pledged themselves to the task of building a cathedral. Considering their modest means and remembering the relatively small size of communities at that time, it is difficult to appreciate the audacity of that commitment. The effort called for the participation of the entire community: men and women, old and young, rich and poor. Further, it was an endeavour that summoned forth all the community had to offer: skilled and unskilled labour, tools, and food. What was most notable, however, was that the construction took hundreds of years to complete.

Again, Reinhold Niebuhr points out, “Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime: therefore, we must be saved by hope.” At the time of publication, New Dawn was in its forty-seventh year. The organization is well into its second generation and the third generation is within sight. Most of those of the first generation have completed their terms, retired, or died. Like the cathedral builders of old, they will not be present to the end, though this never hindered their energetic contribution. Likewise, those who now comprise the organization share the understanding that they are part of a long-term community-building effort and will also not see the end. The second generation has been gifted with the hope engendered by the first and they in turn will bestow this same gift on those who follow.

COMPETENCE

Cape Breton has long been afflicted with a sense of powerlessness. The community has often seen itself as inadequate and incapable. We have tended to look to the outside for direction. New Dawn began without the benefit of either capital or influence. Instead, the organization gathered together volunteers, who were gifted with generous hearts and particular skills. On the basis of their talent, determination, and competence New Dawn began and continues.

The organization was launched at the conclusion of the western industrial period and at the birth of the western knowledge economy. While industrialization was characterized by authoritarian structures, the new economy moved away from notions of command and control. Business guru Peter Drucker points out that in a traditional organization, the role of the manager is to relay orders downward and information upward. The modern economy, however, presumes a relationship between people with special skills and an organization. Experts require access to organizations so as to make their knowledge productive. At the same time, modern organizations depend on people with expertise. People engaged in the modern economy function as associates, not subordinates. Concepts such as team, co-operation, and interdependence are fundamental to the operation of a successful modern enterprise. Drucker puts it like this:

The prototype of the modern organization is the symphony orchestra. Each of the two hundred and fifty musicians in the orchestra is a specialist, and a high grade one. Yet by itself the tuba doesn't make music; only the orchestra can do that. The orchestra performs only because all two hundred and fifty musicians have the same score. They all subordinate their specialty to a common task. And they all play only one piece of music at any given time.

New Dawn is a modern entity; it is entirely dependent on the talents and skills of the people that comprise its orchestra. New Dawn's competence is, in turn, served by its modernity.

The organization is governed by a volunteer board. In the beginning, this was a controversial issue. The anxiety was that volunteers would not be inclined to attend to the operation of businesses. Because they were not financially invested, they would not take their responsibilities seriously. MacLeod's counter was people were motivated by more than money. If called upon, people would assume responsibility for their community. That New Dawn has been in business for more than forty years validates MacLeod's perspective. In fact, New Dawn's volunteer board is one of the organization's richest components.

ACTION AND REFLECTION

Early on, New Dawn identified its methodology: identify the challenge or opportunity, determine an appropriate response that leads to financial sustainability, act, then reflect on the experience. This dynamic enables good ideas to be manifested and is consistent with Paulo Freire's notion of praxis, put forth in 1970. Freire argues that balancing action and reflection is critical; otherwise, reflection degenerates into verbalism, and action spirals into activism. Verbalism means endless talk. The problem grows and blossoms into an impossible difficulty. Activism means mindless busyness; the possibility of impact is lost. Balance is the path that leads to outcomes.

New Dawn treasures its freedom, embraces authentic conversations, stands on a foundation of its values, understands the necessity of becoming more and more competent, and balances its actions with reflection. The organization's ways are not intellectual or technical. They represent points of wisdom and are characterized by infinite richness and depth.

LEADERSHIP

Over the years, New Dawn has developed a deep appreciation for the importance and power of leadership. Nothing happens without a leader. Leaders are rare, extraordinary, and precious. Identifying leadership is an endless challenge. When Saint Augustine was asked to describe motion, he replied that he couldn't. He added, "But, I know it when I see it." Leadership too is hard to define, but most people know it when they see it.

There are those who misunderstand how to build an organization, believing it is about gathering people. Building an organization, however, is about gathering the *right* people. Building New Dawn has been about searching, welcoming, and encouraging the right people—those who may possess the gift of leadership.

In her 1995 book, *Artists, Craftsman and Technocrats: The Dreams, Realities and Illusions of Leadership*, Patricia Pitcher addresses the issue of senior organizational leadership. Pitcher worked for and witnessed the dramatic fall of a successful Canadian corporation. On the basis of that experience, Pitcher set out to better understand the factors that led to that failure.

According to Pitcher there generally are three leadership types found in organizations: artists, craftsmen, and technocrats. The artist is oriented toward people, open-minded, intuitive, and visionary. Craftsmen are dedicated, knowledgeable, and wise. These two types are fellow travellers. In contrast, the technocrat, who tends to have contempt for artists and craftsmen, is detail-oriented, rigid, hard-headed, and has no interest in new ideas. Pitcher argues that, while artists and craftsmen can be gifted leaders, technocrats, while important organizational assets, typically are not. Concluding her postmortem, she notes that technocrats eventually assumed the senior leadership roles at the corporation where she had worked, and ultimately brought the corporation to ruin.

Henry Mintzberg wrote the foreword to Pitcher's book. He states that she shows "how the Technocrats killed, what the Artists built, and the Craftsmen protected." According to Mintzberg:

A leader has to be one of two things. He either has to be a brilliant visionary...a truly creative strategist.... Or else she has to be a true empowerer, who can bring out the best in others. Managers who are neither can be deadly in organizations that need energy and change.

New Dawn's work is to empower people and help enable a community to change. Its efforts are meaningful and create energy. To this point, New Dawn has had two senior leaders, Greg MacLeod and me. Relying on Pitcher's typology, MacLeod was undoubtedly an artist. While he may or may not have been a brilliant strategist, he certainly was a visionary, and a magnificent tactician. As for myself, others will be the judge. But, whatever my gifts or lack thereof, leadership selection will always be the organization's key vulnerability. What Pitcher points to and what Mintzberg confirms is that organizations like New Dawn require visionary or empowering leaders. Without one or the other, the nature and longevity of the organization will suffer.

A NEW NARRATIVE

The lives of all people, in all times, are driven by a narrative or an overarching story. Stories have a power that arises from the meaning they offer us. Though we can be completely unaware of the stories that govern our lives, they either empower or oppress the collective imagination. They advise us who we are, who we are not, and what we can or cannot become.

The stories that serve as the foundation for spiritual traditions provide for striking examples of the magnificence of narratives and their dominion. The Old Testament is a story about a people destined to live in God's favour. The New Testament too is a profound narrative about love, mercy, and forgiveness. The ancient Bhagavad Gita is an eloquent description of the epic battle between divine possibility and earthly constraint. A more recent narrative is embodied in the United States

Declaration of Independence. This narrative includes the inspiring declaration that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As Neil Postman, the American educator, wrote in 1995, “We are unceasingly creating histories and futures for ourselves through the medium of narrative. Without narrative, life has no meaning.”

Historically the Cape Breton narrative has been restrictive. It has been a story of dependence, uncertainty, powerlessness, and poverty. New Dawn’s aspiration has been for a new narrative. A narrative about hope, confidence, self-reliance, and prosperity; a story that welcomes new people to our shores and a story that calls our children home. In other words, a story about our new dawn.