

# Derek Cook's speaking notes for opening keynote speech titled *'Resilience and Inclusion: What's the Connection?'*

Come Together Alberta Conference  
Hosted by the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association  
May 16, 2018  
Delta Edmonton South Hotel and Conference Centre

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There was a young man in northern Ireland who was arrested for being a suspected member of the IRA. After languishing in prison for several months, he received a letter from his father who wrote: "Son, I miss you here. Every year you would come and help me till the back field to plant the potatoes. With you not here I don't know what I am going to do." The young man quickly wrote back to his father and said: "Dad, don't dig up the back field. That's where I buried the guns." A few weeks later he received another letter from his father who wrote: "Son; the other day a group of soldiers came and dug up the back field looking for guns. What should I do?" To which the son responded: "Plant the potatoes."

## 1. The Potato Famine

I feel somewhat entitled to tell that joke because I have just a wee bit of Irish blood in me. It seems a great great great grandmother by the name of Beatty immigrated to Canada from Ireland in the mid-1800s and introduced some Irish blood into the family. Apart from the Irish blood, however, our family is almost exclusively German Mennonite.

Now, you may be wondering, how a German Mennonite ends up with a name like Cook. Well, the original name was Koch and in the mid-1800s the Kochs settled in the Waterloo area, or Berlin as it was then known. They came themselves as immigrants fleeing persecution first from Europe to Pennsylvania, and then later up into southern Ontario.

The Mennonites had come to southern Ontario with the promise of land and that their pacifist beliefs would be respected. The Berlin area provided a peaceful place for them to settle. They largely kept to themselves and life was good. Until the First World War and the British Empire ended up at war with Germany.

Those were tense times in a community called Berlin. There were in fact riots in the streets of that, until then, peaceful town. At one point a statue of the Kaiser, which had rested prominently in a downtown park, was attacked and, local legend has it, thrown into the lake. The name of the city was subsequently changed from Berlin to Kitchener, and it was in this context that the family name was changed from Koch to Cook.

Now the Mennonites were not the only immigrants who had sought refuge in the farmland around Berlin in the 1800's. Many waves of immigrants had also come, including those from Ireland. Our family history tells us that great great great grandmother Beatty had fled Ireland in the 1840s, along with thousands more, due to the great potato famine of the time. For those of you not familiar, the potato famine resulted from successive failures of the potato crop on which the Irish peasantry had come to depend. As a result, about 1 million Irish peasants starved to death or succumbed to disease, while about 2 million more emigrated to places like Canada.

Now, the potato famine is instructive. You see, potatoes were not native to Ireland. Rather, they were introduced to the country from Latin America, having been brought back to Europe by the Spanish Conquistadors. The potato, it turned out, thrived in the European climate, particularly Ireland and quickly supplanted other crops as the mainstay of the Irish diet and economy. Except there was one problem.

While there was a great diversity of potato varieties in South America, only a handful were brought back to Europe. As the potato reproduces from the root rather than seed, there was also no cross-mixing so the genetic diversity of the crop was extremely narrow. Enter the blight.

It is thought the blight was introduced from North America and once it took hold of the potato crop, its spread was uncontained due to the lack of genetic diversity of the crops. Dependence on a single crop, and on a limited diversity within the crop, had left a seemingly productive burgeoning economy vulnerable. And nobody realized it until it was too late.

## 2. Robust Yet Fragile Systems

The Irish potato economy is a good example of what the author Andrew Zolli calls “Robust Yet Fragile Systems.” A Robust Yet Fragile System is one that is resilient in the face of anticipated dangers, yet highly vulnerable to unanticipated threats. At first the potato economy was a good thing. Potatoes were far more profitable, predictable and lucrative than the cereal crops the economy depended on before. The potato economy gradually became ever more efficient and seemingly less vulnerable to the vagaries of the climate. It was the unanticipated shock that blinded-sided them; the introduction of an unknown blight for which there was no natural defense.

Having worked for many years in the public sector which is tasked with ensuring the well-being of our communities, it seems to me we have done a pretty good job in anticipating and planning for dangers and threats. Conscious of our duty and accountability to taxpayers we have streamlined our services and made them efficient. We have established clear lines of accountability and centralized decision-making to speed up our processes and clarify responsibilities. We have instituted sound risk management practices that have allowed us to anticipate and plan for things that may go wrong. And, despite some bumps along the road, I would say that as a result our systems are fairly robust. But are they also fragile? Is it possible that the very things we do to make our systems robust also render them increasingly vulnerable?

## 3. The Challenges We Face

The systems we have developed over the years have responded well to many of the challenges we’ve been faced with until now: rapid population growth and the associated demand for infrastructure and services; a tightening fiscal environment; and technological change, to name a few. These are complicated challenges and risks, but ones we might be able to roughly foresee and plan for.

But think of the challenges we face today: climate change; growing inequality; entrenched poverty and exclusion; and increasing social and political polarization. These are complex challenges which are difficult to foresee and understand, and even harder to know how to intervene. In fact, any attempt to intervene produces multiple spin-off effects that are impossible to predict. As our local complexity guru Mark Cabaj notes “*You intervene in the system and the system intervenes back at you.*” Perhaps the responses we have developed to deal with the challenges and pressures of our world to this point are not the ones we need going forward.

## 4. Our Response to the Challenges

For many people, the thought of these challenges can be overwhelming. Many of you may know of the Canadian community builder Paul Born. In his recent book “Deepening Community” he suggests that people have three basic responses to such anxiety producing threats:

- **Withdrawal.** In the face of such uncertainty, one strategy is to retreat. This is the flight response, the land of Facebook, NIMBY and the street front garage. We cocoon in the shelter of our small and familiar world and we don’t engage much in community. Skeptical of politicians, we don’t vote. Stressed for time we might give money but don’t ask us to volunteer. We see ourselves as taxpayers but less so as citizens. We keep to ourselves and look after our own. Don’t trouble me with the concerns of others because I’ve got all I can handle for myself, thank you very much. Individually we may feel robust, but lacking community we are fragile.
- **Moving Against Each Other.** While some people withdraw, others may mobilize to fight. We perceive the cause of our challenges to lie with some identifiable group. We neatly divide the world into “us” and “them.” In this world life is a zero-sum game, a competition between us and them. “Them” could be immigrants, refugees, indigenous persons, welfare recipients, the mentally ill or addicted or any manner of social or political identity. In response we build walls, real or imaginary, and fight to preserve our “way of life”. Our smaller solidarity builds as we actively exclude those who are different. Collectively we may feel robust, but we are in fact very fragile.
- **Moving Towards Each Other.** The third alternative, however, offers us some hope. That is the possibility of people coming together in times of change and threat to work for the common good. Human beings, we know, are hard-wired for community. It is in community that we realize our full potential as individuals and as a species. While our instinct may convince us of the survival of the fittest, in fact the key to survival for us as a species has not been our capacity for

competition, but rather for cooperation. This is the proud history of the cooperative movement in western Canada in the face of economic and environmental crises. This is the example of our response to natural disasters such as the Fort Mac fires or the southern Alberta floods. This is us at our best. This is the path of resilience. But how do we get there?

## 5. The Principles of Resilience

Resilient systems are ones that are able to adapt to stress and change and quickly recover from shocks. Research into resilient systems reveals that they tend to have the following attributes. First, resilient systems are **flexible**, having the ability to evolve and adapt in the face of crisis or change. As a result, they also have a high degree of **adaptive capacity**, meaning that they have the ability to learn and innovate. Flexible and adaptive systems further have a degree of built in **redundancy** that may appear inefficient but provides necessary back-up resources in the event of a system shock.

At a deeper level, these characteristics are made possible by more fundamental attributes. Flexibility and adaptive capacity are enabled by **distributed power**. Where power is hierarchical and centralized, flexibility diminishes and the ability to quickly sense and adapt to change is reduced. Distributed power in turn requires a high degree of **social capital** that links people together in civic networks with a shared sense of purpose. This facilitates the other key feature of resilient systems – **cooperation**.

In order for empowered cooperative networks to flourish, they require another fundamental characteristic of resilience which is **diversity**. Diversity is critical for many reasons. Not only does it open up the range of ideas available to us which allows for innovation, it also increases the range of resources available to us for an effective response to crisis and change. True diversity also requires a high degree of **tolerance for dissent**. Dissenting opinions and questions are the ones that challenge our thinking and drive us to innovation.

But all of this is based on the foundational condition of **trust**. Without trust, there is no tolerance of dissent, no innovation, no valuing of diversity which builds our shared identity and social capital. Without trust, power can never be shared, and our adaptive capacity and flexibility is impaired.

Recently I've been privileged to participate in a process to develop a Resilience Strategy for The City of Calgary. At one of the working sessions someone posed a question about the challenges of public engagement and asked "*why don't they trust us?*" My response was to turn the question on its head. Perhaps the bigger question we need to ask is "*why don't we trust them?*" whoever "them" is.

I suspect that the reason we don't trust "them" is that we have built ourselves robust yet fragile systems. We have cultivated a culture of risk management that seeks to reduce our exposure to risk by doing the exact opposite of what the principles of resilience require. Instead of decentralizing power we increasingly centralize it. We limit dissent and diverse voices from our reports and debate. We see the struggle for resources as a competition between departments or groups. We reduce our redundancies and increase our efficiencies to the greatest extent possible. And in so doing we limit our flexibility and adaptive capacity. And the greatest casualty of this approach is trust.

Trust is risky. Including diverse and dissenting voices is risky. Sharing power is risky. Cooperation is risky. But it is necessary if we are to have a chance of being resilient in the face of the challenges ahead of us.

## 6. Diversity, Trust and What it Means for Our Communities and Organizations

So what does this mean for diversity and for our communities and organizations? I am privileged to work in a faith-based university so dabble occasionally in theology. It is interesting to me that in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, there are several groups who are referred to almost synonymously with "the poor". Those are the widow, the alien, the afflicted and the fatherless. What all of these groups have in common is the fact that they would have been outsiders, marginalized, excluded from society, power and access to the decisions that would have affected them.

If we jump forward 3,000 years and we reflect on the groups of people most likely to live in poverty today we find that the situation is not any different. Those at most risk of poverty are single people, recent immigrants, indigenous persons, persons with disabilities and lone-parent families; in short, the widow, the alien, the afflicted and the fatherless. Also the marginalized, the excluded, those shut out of power and influence over the decisions that affect them.

Now, our various religious traditions tell us that it is these groups of people to whom we must pay particular care and attention. Why? Well, there is of course the moral imperative that arises from our

hopefully innate empathy and concern. But there may be something deeper at work here too. The American theologian and social justice advocate Jim Wallis suggests that we need to pay attention to these groups of people because they function like a canary in a coal mine. As the most vulnerable members of our community they will be the first to experience the effects of a toxic social environment. We pay attention to these people because their condition tells us something about the society that we have created in which we all live.

When trust evaporates and we begin to passively or actively exclude those who are different we challenge the very foundations of resilience. Whenever our conversation devolves into questions about us vs. them we have moved into very dangerous territory as our social fabric, the fabric that protects us all, is fraying. While it may feel like we're growing stronger by reducing the perceived threats, in fact we grow increasingly fragile and vulnerable to whatever is unseen and just beyond the horizon.

You see, the problem with us vs. them is that the "us" invariably gets smaller and smaller while "them" gets ever bigger. As we first withdraw into our isolated camps and later move against each other we have compromised the fabric of community that will sustain us all in the face of inevitable crisis and change. While it is natural for humans to bond into tribes, it is also uniquely within our human capacity to increasingly expand rather than narrow the bounds of the tribe. And the resilient society is the one that is able to do this effectively.

But how do we get there? Paul Born offers a simple approach to overcoming our isolation or fear and building a deeper community. It begins, he suggests, by **sharing our stories**. Fear is usually driven by the unknown and we overcome our fear by knowing and being known. In knowing, being in relationship with people, our fears and stereotypes break down. Sharing our stories leads us deeper and allows us to, secondly, begin **enjoying one another**. This is the practice of hospitality where we may sit down and share a meal together, or get up and dance. Once we know and enjoy each other's presence, it leads us further into the capacity to **care for one another**. And only once we know, enjoy and care for another do we approach the deepest level of community where we are able to **work together for a better world**.

Too often I believe we have it backwards. Eager for action we try to begin by working together for a better world without having done the essential pre-work of building the relationships of trust that enable that work to happen. And so we fall into a different kind of "us" vs. "them" with "us" trying to help or advocate for "them" lacking the foundational trust relationships. Because at the end of the day there is neither us nor them and the practice of building community is one that recognizes that the work of building a better world together transforms and heals all of us.

## Conclusion

And so I began today by sharing my story. For many years the Mennonites were known as "the quiet in the land". We withdrew and created strong bonds of community among ourselves. We didn't participate in the military and people pretty much left us alone. In Berlin, the British and the Germans didn't inter-mingle and our enclaves were robust. Yet very very fragile. Just like a crop of potatoes. It was the introduction of a foreign war, a foreign blight, that brought it all down. And as a result I bear the name Cook with an Irish ancestor.

What are the blights we face today and will we be resilient in the face of them? I think of the blights of loneliness, suicide, or addictions and overdoses. I fear we are once again confronting the age old blights of racism or the fear of the other; whether we define that other in terms of their religion, sexual orientation or economic status. And it compromises the resilience of us all.

Yet I have hope. I have hope in our capacity to learn. I have hope in our capacity for reconciliation. I have hope in our capacity to resist the temptation to withdraw, or to turn against each other, and instead have faith in our ability to come towards each other and reclaim the idea of a common good. I have hope in the future where a German Mennonite boy with an Irish ancestor can be married to a south Asian woman from Kenya, and our daughter is all of these and something more. Although we may embrace our diversity gradually and haltingly, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "*the arc of history is long but it bends toward justice*".

In our current age when we seem to once again be conjuring up various forms of "them", justice requires us to be vigilant. It requires us to actively challenge the forces that would divide us. It requires us to share power, extend trust, embrace dissent and maybe do exactly the opposite of what our risk management practices would dictate; because now is the time for taking not managing risk. Because now is the time to pay attention to the voices of the marginalized, for our own voice is inextricably bound up in theirs.

I would like to leave you with this quote from the Australian indigenous activist Lilla Watson who said “*If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.*” This is the bold and beautiful work that you are all engaged in and I trust that you will do it well.