

Bridging the Gap Between Generations

by Lyn Hartley



As part of the Ontario regional program in May, the Institute is planning an intergenerational dialogue. Two of the facilitators have more than a mutual interest as they share a common DNA. Mary and Kalin Stacey are a mother-son combination and will be hosting the event along with pianist and leadership educator Michael Jones and Shambhala community member and conversation facilitator Sera Thompson. Mary is a Canadian management consultant while Kalin is studying linguistics and equity studies at the University of Toronto.

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Over the last few years, Kalin has been involved with many different youth leadership conferences including the World Youth Leadership Summit and Shambhala’s Summer Institute in Halifax. What struck him most about the latter gathering was the intermingling of generations:

“There was a different atmosphere at the Shambhala Institute, and a different demographic than I had ever been part of. It was mostly the established adult generation discussing many of the same things and in the same tone that I had been doing with my own generation. It struck me as odd that I hadn’t considered a conversation like that was possible. My mother and I were thinking that the Institute’s May program is a perfect opportunity to delve into the question of the disparity of conversation between youth and elders.”

Having attended the vast majority of summer programs, Mary was similarly interested in bringing the energy and potential of an all-ages

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leadership dialogue to Ontario. “Over the years, the Institute has pioneered intergenerational dialogues and global village squares. I’ve noticed that the energy that is created during these dialogues flows into the main program in a powerful way and enriches the whole environment. Having youth involved in the design of this event has really broadened the questions we are asking.”

Mary is interested in the potential of intergenerational leadership in organizations, communities, and society.

She believes that the generational divide is often experienced in the cocoon of our nuclear families. We may be cut off from the extended family by geography or isolated within our homes by the polarizing technologies. Where is the wisdom shared? Mary comments, “So many of my peers have begun to think of themselves as part of the sandwich generation. In stressful times they feel ‘stuck between’ their parents and children. What is the impact of this? What if we shifted our way of being with this?”

“In the development of North American society we have lost something—we have lost an ability to stand on common ground in a world that we share, effortlessly. One of the really important things we can try to do is go back to this question of a common world. We need to find a place where different worlds can meet.”

When working, Mary helps clients address the realities of the multi-generational workplace. One client recently shared her challenges with a multi-generational team. Their talking past each other rather than learning from each other had real implications for business performance. While many companies are paying attention to managing the different generations, Mary wonders how we could collapse differences by developing capacities for intergenerational conversation, collaboration, and leadership.

At the societal level, Mary is aware of the legacy her own generation is creating: “We have an opportunity to engage all the generations in conversations about our complex global challenges and our mutual interest in social change. One of the questions that Kalin contributed to our design conversation was, ‘whose wisdom and values are we paying attention to?’ The answers to the questions that will impact ‘seven generations to come’ can only be found if we recognize that wisdom isn’t contingent on how many years we’ve lived.”

This gap is also apparent to Kalin through his work with youth: “I’ve worked with a lot of different youth groups, and I find there is a pattern where we define ourselves and then speak out about issues. There is an older establishment that talks back to us and sets the rules. In that framework, there doesn’t seem to be dialogue; instead, there are several different monologues and we don’t necessarily reach each other. The intergenerational dialogue seems to be a way to foster actual listening and discussion.”

They have named the dialogue *The Quest for a New Common Ground: An Intergenerational Leadership Exchange*. Mary comments on the intention of the three hour session: “We are really interested in opening up an intergenerational field so that people have an experience they can embody when they go back to their workplaces, families, and communities. Can we refresh our way of seeing

in ways that change our relationships even just a little? Building our intergenerational leadership capacity may lead us to a new common ground.”

They are also trying to make sure that youth are integrally involved in the facilitation of the session. Drawing from past experiences, Kalin notes how youth can be subtly marginalized. “It was the general feeling among some of the youth that our presence in the dialogue was treated as a novelty. What we said was interesting, simply because we were young and we managed to get there, but the content of our words or reasons for being there weren’t as important. People felt wonderful that young people were involved but how authentic or sincere that involvement was didn’t seem to be an issue.”

In regards to the design of the Exchange, Mary comments, “We invite people to come even if they aren’t staying for the entire program. We’re holding it on a Sunday afternoon, and some people will be bringing members of another generation with them. We’d like anyone over the age of 13, from all sectors and communities, to join us. It promises to be an inspiring combination of Michael’s music, the contemplative practices of Shambhala, and conversation that leads to fresh ideas. Participants will be able to have conversations with those from their own generation and then cross boundaries.”

Kalin describes the hopes he has that mutual mentoring conversations might provide a way to touch back with someone throughout the learning experience of the intensive program:

“We’re hoping that mentoring relationships will naturally emerge during the Exchange and continue through the program. We hope pairings of youth and an elder will form on a mutual exchange of perspectives to honor the fact the world changes so quickly these days it is helpful to access the widest perspective.”

Widely read in philosophy, Kalin comments on the speed of change that can be plucked from Margaret Mead’s work:

“Margaret Mead published a book called *The Generational Gap*, and it was all about how North American society was split in the twentieth century, since the industrial revolution. Several years ago grandparents and parents were able to say, ‘When I grew up, my parents taught me everything I knew because the world I was born into was the world they knew. At this time, the world my children are growing up in is not the same world that I grew up in.’ For me, this is a beautiful conception of the idea that in the development of North American society we have lost something—we have lost an ability to stand on common ground in a world that we share, effortlessly. One of the really important things we can try to do is go back to this question of a common world. We need to find a place where different worlds can meet.”

When asked about co-facilitating as a mother-son team, Mary comments, “I know it is a cliché, but my children are my teachers. In a world that is

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changing so rapidly—what important teachers they are. Kalin and I have come out the other side of the parent-teen dynamic and into a conversation about our shared and unique experiences.” In working together Mary speculates, “I hope we’ll model what its like to create space for one another, even with all the complexity our relationship holds. We’ll have an intuitive sense of the boundaries that others might not” to which Kalin responds, “Even if we plan on crossing them anyways!”