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Book Review by Raymond Dart

Voices from the Voluntary Sector: Perspectives on leadership challenges. Edited by Frederick Bird and Frances Westley. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. 459 pp. ISBN 9780802096616 (pkb).

In the past decade there have been many calls for new thinking and leadership in the nonprofit sector in Canada. There have been many predictable responses as well, which in turn have generated the equally predictable feelings of déjà vu and eternal recurrence that plague so much of the human development field. One of the more interesting responses to these calls for sectoral renewal came recently from the always-interesting McConnell Family Foundation, and from Tim Brodhead, the former president of the foundation and whose voice on non-profit and charitable sector matters is unarguably one of this country's most compelling.

Many of us were excited by the advent of the McGill-McConnell Program, and by the promise of a sustained engagement between many leading practitioners and thinkers of Canada's non-profit sector in an organizational crucible. As this engagement wraps up, one significant collective written output has emerged: an edited volume called *Voices from the Voluntary Sector: Perspectives on leadership challenges*, edited by Frederick Bird and Frances Westley and published by the University of Toronto Press. Did the McGill-McConnell Program live up to the hopes and attributions placed upon it by many of the rest of us in Canada's voluntary sector? The perspective of this review is that the volume offers the rest of us an articulate but eerily disquieting view of what may be the "high-water mark" of thinking at the most prominent levels of our non-profit and voluntary sector community.

The volume itself is surely and explicitly an odd bird. Almost none of the authors are writers/researchers by profession but rather are seasoned practitioners and leaders in Canada's voluntary sector. Most of the chapters are in the liminal area between "field research" and "theory" and "professional reflection" that we might categorize as "grounded think pieces." This format is actually a compelling innovation, treading as it does between the reference-happy tendencies of academic researchers and the localism tendencies of practitioners. (Note: As promising as this kind of reflective practice writing is, several of the chapters do read more like good papers written for graduate student seminars—which they were, originally.)

What do we find in *Voices*? It is arranged thematically to reflect the program's pedigree in Henry Mintzberg's pluralistic and humane approach to management and organization. The chapters reflect mindsets described as "reflective," "analytical," "global," "collaborative," and "catalytic," with an overarching values-grounded and ethical framework. While the mindsets are interesting labels, the chapter topics are much more variable, with many of them rehashing and situating concepts popularized over the past 15 years by the leading thinkers connected with the McGill-McConnell Program, including Frances Westley, Meg Wheatley, and Brenda Zimmerman.

In terms of the substantive work presented in *Voices*, the reader can expect a diverse range of settings and concerns. There are too many distinct chapters to review them separately in a short article such as this, so I will discuss them as jointly as it is possible for texts so different. There are some fairly consistent and distinct features in the chapters. Most of them "contain" the author and their focal organization in some meaningful way, often weaving some conceptual strand (such as "dialogue" or "complexity theory") through the author's own career or through the development of their own organization. Most of them meditate or systematically reflect on some ideas rather than simply digesting them or reproducing them, as is too common in standard literature reviews. These differences make each chapter an atypical read, and my experience of the book was one of both interest at this distinctive approach and also a sense that, in at least some cases, the creation of the chapter might have been more germinal for the writers themselves rather than the reader community.

Fundamentally, the chapters in this edited volume could be best described as more concerned with digesting and processing the recent past in Canada's non-profit and voluntary sector than looking ahead. As such, the volume contains worthwhile sum-ups of thinking in such matters as accountability and effectiveness (e.g., Jerry Demarco's chapter on the Donner Award methodology), collaboration and inter-organizational relations (e.g., Alain Roy's chapter on international NGOs and Lily Mah-Sen's chapter on Amnesty International's bridging options), donor/charity relations (chapters by Charlotte Cloutier and Robert Ryan), and social entrepreneurship (chapters by Elizabeth Moreau and Jennifer Flanagan). Overall, the chapters are fairly solid essays, usually grounded in a specific organizational or policy context. They are not, however, strong conceptual essays that introduce or develop new ideas. Rather, their strength is in their ability to situate ideas in some of Canada's specific non-profit and voluntary contexts.

For the McGill-McConnell Program to publish a volume that developed very little new ground is the source of disquiet for me. To many of us, the Program represented much of the best of our brain and experience trust, yet the volume shows little evidence of ground being turned that is not already being turned frequently elsewhere.

Some of the absences seem particularly eye-opening in 2011. There is virtually no attention paid to major tectonic changes such as information technology and the Internet, the creation of structural social underclasses in Canada and the unravelling of our social safety net, and the gathering marketization and commodification of virtually all elements of civil society. The chapters by Blackstock and Bayes were notable exceptions to this disquiet, as they both developed domains that read as substantively new and distinct, and that add solidly to our sector discourse. However, even these chapters paid scant attention to promising and innovative modes of community engagement. Like the major journals in the field, this volume pays much more

attention to relations with funders, governments, confederate organizations, et cetera, than it does to the individual or communal “targets” or beneficiaries of the services produced by our voluntary sector. I am compelled to ask the rhetorical question: when will we take our social change models as seriously as those of our organizational development?

Overall, I would conclude that *Voices* provides a number of solid and situated essays on major issues facing Canada’s non-profit and voluntary sector, but does not lead those of us working in and for this sector in many ways that are new, or to many destinations that we are not already going.

About the Author / L’auteur

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