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Let's Talk: The need for intergenerational dialogue

We are on the brink of catastrophic changes on Earth during our lifetime. Our well-being and the stability of our planet are at risk; thus, all generations must come together to develop new ways of being and doing. It's time to make change happen – for the future of my generation and for future generations. In a world that's passed from generation to generation, we need generations to talk candidly and deeply about what's happening in this moment in time. It's clear our society is not addressing the big issues effectively and what is being done is not working. A recent IPCC climate report on society's most concerning intergenerational issue is considered a "file of shame" (The Associated Press). Moreover, a recent CAMH survey found that of students from grades 7-12, "half of respondents expressed concern about climate change, saying it is fuelling their anxiety and making them feel depressed about the future" (Yousif). Students want to talk about important questions like, "What matters to me? Where am I in this world?" (Yousif). We need to start *really* talking. I want to talk – because we're not talking about the things we need to talk about. Without human connection, especially across generations, complex multilayered "wicked" challenges can't be addressed. Rittel and Webber introduced the term "wicked" to draw attention to the complexities of social policy problems (Rittel & Webber). Global warming, hunger, poverty, inequality, and injustices are just a few of the wicked challenges this generation faces. They are questions, that "do not have a beginning and an end, therefore their solutions are not true or false, only good or bad, there is no way to test the

solution to a wicked problem, they cannot be studied through trial and error, there is no end to the number of solutions or approaches to a wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber). We need to go deeper – which can only start in honest dialogue. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services emphasized that addressing the ecological crises “requires transformative change – a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals, and values” (Dias et al.). A meaningful interactive process, focusing on shared intergenerational experience and wisdom, is a foundation on which to build positive cultural change, within our societal imaginary, both locally and globally. To develop ecopsychosocial (a term coined by Peter Whitehouse) well-being we need to create solutionscapes – an “ecology of intentional and serendipitous actions emerging from deep, diverse relationships, especially across generations” (Bosak). Solutionscapes involve “navigating highly complex problems facing society” through “new thinking around the multiple causes of problems” which “may open new insights about possible pathways toward better and more accepted solutions” (Fallon, et al.). We must explore a solutionscape through meaningful intergenerational dialogue and connection, to find what it means to be human and live in harmony within our environment. My generation needs this; we *all* need this, to have any hope of navigating the treacherous waters of complex wicked challenges ahead. This essay explores what has negatively affected intergenerational connections, looking at the stakeholders, the contributing factors, and then assesses current attempts at mitigating the disconnect in order to bring about positive change. Given the importance of intergenerational relationships, how might we inspire and create an intergenerational connection as well as dialogue to create social advocacy and combat today’s complex, multilayered, wicked problems?

The stakeholders are all of us, generations disconnected, including younger and older people, as well as society as a whole. All stakeholders benefit from intergenerational connections. Something has changed in our society that has negatively affected this intergenerational connection. Intergenerational wisdom and learning are defined as being “an interactive process that takes place between different generations resulting in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values” (Bratianu). Humans evolved over time in small, mixed-age communities where children were embedded in adult activities, and knowledge was shared through oral traditions and stories. There has been a change in what society values, away from an intergenerational transfer of wisdom, values, and knowledge to the distilling of all values down to economic value. Ageist views that certain people are “too young” or “too old” to do various things have a significant negative effect on how those individuals see their worth and value. How can society’s wicked challenges be addressed when people, especially elders and youth, feel lost? Many older adults face a crisis of meaning, often isolated and marginalized (Dundon). Today’s youth frequently lack guidance, feel directionless, lack the deep connections and relationships which provide meaning (Yousif). Instead of placing grand expectations on one generation, solutions may be found by bringing the generations together. It has been documented that older people who engage in intergenerational relationships have a better quality of life, report much less depression, better physical health, and higher degrees of life satisfaction (Bosak). Additionally, a Harvard study backed up the connection between intergenerational connection and well-being as a person ages (Freedman). While at the same time, youth greatly benefit from intergenerational connections. According to Satya Moolani, when children engage in intergenerational connections, “there are improvements in self-esteem and interest in school.” Society also greatly gains from intergenerational connections. According to Susan Bosak,

intergenerational relationships have been found to generate valuable social gain when generations collaborate toward a common goal. The ability for intergenerational collaboration to create profound social advocacy and change is important in combating today's complex challenges. "Though many will say that the future is in the hands of the children, in fact, the future lies in the relationship between the generations" (Bateson). Given the benefits of intergenerational relationships and the beneficial connections in past societies, why have these meaningful connections and societal frameworks been lost?

Over the past 50 years, cultural and economic changes have contributed to society's loss of intergenerational connection. We tend to view aging as a negative process filled with illness, fragility, and a lack of purpose. Further, "there is a growing problem in society where younger people do not see the value of older people in society, even though the older generations hold expert knowledge" (Lakareber). This attitude is relatively new, based on modern worldviews. Historically, elders were honoured and respected; however, this is no longer the case in our current fast-paced society, driven by efficiency, and access to enormous amounts of information. No longer are multigenerational homes valued; instead, they are perceived as a lack of financial prosperity or independence (Thomas TEDx Talk). Economic productivity is valued over wisdom, caring, and relationships. The Baby Boomer generation are no longer retiring to become elders for their grandchildren, but rather they seek to defy aging and stay "young." Billions of dollars are capitalized on by antiaging businesses. Culturally we began hiding from aging and chasing everlasting youth (Thomas TEDx Talk). Instead of elders teaching the young through shared lived experience, children are almost exclusively educated in schools. Instead of being taught how to think about the world's complex challenges, the main focus for kids is to become productive adults in a consumer society. Lifelong learning across generations is key to adapting

to the ever-changing world around us. Bringing generations back together can create positive change and a sense of value throughout the human life cycle. What kind of action is needed to create intergenerational connections?

Although difficult to facilitate, intergenerational connection has been promoted through The Intergenerational School, the Legacy Project, and Generations United. Our society requires more than “thinking outside the box.” We need to get back to working and living within what Indigenous peoples refer to as the “circle of life,” with humans and nature living and working in harmony in meaningful connections (Blenkinsop). In *Sand Talk*, Tyson Yunkaporta describes how Western cultures come up with solutions and start with direct action – looking at relationships as a by-product or after-thought or a form of “engagement.” Instead, an Indigenous approach is completely reversed: beginning with respect (listening; ears/eyes), flowing into connecting (relationship; heart), then to reflect (thinking; mind), and only then direct (action; hands) (Yunkaporta). It’s about responding authentically without preconceived constraints (Yunkaporta). This is how I want to talk across generations. Organizations such as Generations United (GU), The Intergenerational School (TIS), and the Legacy Project are all working on bringing generations together. GU is an American non-profit organization whose mission is to “improve the lives of children, youth, and older people through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs” (Generations United). They support and sponsor programs that enrich participants’ lives and help address vital social and community issues while at the same time building positive resources that old and young can provide each other and their communities. TIS is a public, non-profit community charter school in Cleveland, OH. It connects generations as part of the daily fabric of the school. Older adults and students learn from and with each other, modeling lifelong learning, improving mutual well-being, and creating caring

communities (The Intergenerational School). The Canadian-based, Legacy Project's 7-Generation work is empowering generations to connect with each other and connect the dots across issues to create a bigger story of change for the well-being of lives, community, and the planet (Bosak). They quote anthropologist Margaret Mead that "connections between generations are essential for the mental health and stability of nations." All of these organizations are doing important work that can be leveraged to engage with generations in deep dialogue about the wicked challenges we all face. For example, the Legacy Project uses the Legacy Table as a place to bring generations together to connect and share. The emphasis is on relationships first. This reflects an Indigenous approach. Indigenous thought is "highly contextualized and situated in dynamic relationships with people and landscape, considering many variables at once" (Yunkaporta).

Meaningful dialogue and action can occur by recognizing how changes within society have negatively impacted generations' ability to live with purpose and interdependence. It's not up to only one generation. Young and old talking together can become a kind of "superorganism" (Parsons). New research shows that "conversations between generations... prepares kids for the future... and it empowers them to help make a difference... by providing them with a structure to have conversations with older generations to bring us together" (Denworth). Bringing together the knowledge, wisdom, resilience, perspective, and experience of all generations through intergenerational dialogue is critical to addressing our wicked challenges. Additionally, by drawing on an Indigenous perspective, we can recognize that to make change happen, we need to move from "thinking outside the box," to "thinking inside the circle" (thinking within the circle of life). It is critical to encourage youth to be forward-thinking leaders who initiate intergenerational dialogue and engage voices, views, and perspectives in

shaping worldviews and social imaginaries. To bring about meaningful, positive change requires an intergenerational global leadership plan. I want to talk; we need to talk. Generations talking and making connections together can co-create a solutionscape for our ecopsychosocial well-being. Who knows what possibilities we'll uncover!

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