

**Inspiring Civic Innovation** by Bliss W. Browne

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It's a joy to be with you today to talk about civic innovation.

We live in shifting times with lots of talk about the importance of innovation and the power of innovation. The area of greatest organizational vitality lies at the intersection of innovation, continuity and managed change. We need all three and all three are always present. Standing at the edges of those three intersection circles one finds the center of another larger circle – a place the past, present and future meet. But today I've been asked to address one of those circles, namely innovation. What is it? What does it take? What can we do to promote social, civic innovation?

**I'd like to begin to address the question 'What is civic innovation?' by looking briefly at the work of Jane Addams and how it was innovative. She was a remarkable civic entrepreneur at a time of extraordinary challenges.**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, cities were changing fast. Extremes of wealth and poverty were vast. Millions of immigrants were crowding into American cities living in desperate conditions. Unemployment was rampant and social Darwinism popular – let the strong succeed and the weak perish. Women, men and children lucky enough to have work worked grueling long hours with no social safety nets. Slums grew rapidly and with them disease, crime and corruption.

All this was magnified in Chicago. Lincoln Steffens, writing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, described Chicago as “first in violence, deepest in dirt; loud, lawless, unlovely, ill-smelling, new; an overgrown gawk of a village, the teeming tough among cities. Criminally it was wide open; commercially it was brazen, and socially it was thoughtless and raw.”

**New institutions were needed. When Jane Addams visited Toynbee Hall in London in 1887, it expanded what she saw as possible for Chicago. She could imagine how to begin the work she felt called to do-- to provide social interaction between the classes in the midst of an impoverished immigrant community. She believed that the different classes depended on each other and that promoting social exchange was a natural way to express the growing economic unity of society and the social function of democracy. Jane Addams didn't see what she was doing as “innovative” , but rather a simple act of neighborliness: “It is**

**natural", Jane Addams wrote," to feed the hungry and care for the sick. It is certainly natural to give pleasure to the young, comfort the aged, and to minister to the deep-seated craving for social intercourse that all men feel."**

But she did something new. She saw the power of connections. She saw beyond existing divisions. And soon, Hull House captured the imagination of the whole city of Chicago and beyond that the nation and the world.

Hull House grew quickly and spread to become a community center for the whole of Chicago – with a gym, a music school, a theatre, a boys' club, and dozens of community buildings for conversation and education. Children, unemployed workers, and homeless girls mixed with socialites and scholars. And remarkable bridges were built – between civic activists and politicians, between newly arrived immigrants and old Americans elite, between philanthropists and government officials. Hull House became a laboratory for social innovation and education, a school for active citizenship and social reform.

Jane Addams' work at Hull House led many others to imagine new ways forward –new ways to relate to others who were different, new ways to order the life of the city, new ways to provide hospitality to the stranger and the neglected, new ways to organize work, new ways to practice citizenship and strengthen democracy. Here I want to note the *first mark* of the work of an innovator: **Real innovation prompts secondary innovations, it expands what's possible. If you want to access what's innovative in your own work think about how it has been generative to others. Are others building on what you've started? Is what is possible expanding by virtue of what you've done?**

Jane Addams moved readily between the particular and the larger system, working from solving practical local problems to advocating for policy changes, moving between the local, the national and the international. Her observations of kids playing on city streets led to the development of school playgrounds; her work with children in trouble with the law resulted in the first juvenile courts in the nation; her observations of the exploitation of working women resulted in new labor legislation.

*A second mark of innovation* can be seen in Jane Addams' settlement house practice, namely that **Innovation changes structures**. Sometimes those are the structures of the way we think—these sorts of changes often referred to as 'paradigm shifts'. Sometimes the changes are of structures in the ways we're organized—laws, policies, new types of organizations. Noting this may be especially relevant now since we live in a time many systems are breaking down and new systems are needed. How can we develop "structures of grace", structures that are fresh and refreshing, that enable vision to be lived, that are flexible enough to incorporate learning on an ongoing basis?

It goes almost without saying that **innovation also creatively destroys existing systems, and therefore can be expected to generate suspicion and resistance.** When Jane Addams took on the job of garbage collector for her ward to show how it should be done, her effectiveness threatened the patronage workers who held their jobs as political favors. Jane Addams and her Hull House colleagues often found they had to move to political action –to improve the school system, to push for broader political participation, to fight for children’s’ rights, to demand adequate enforcement of housing and sanitation laws, to fight for legal protection of immigrants’ rights. Not surprisingly, these activities generated resistance, anger and hostility from those whose interests were being challenged and undermined in the name of justice. So as you consider what you perceive as the current urgent work of social justice, reflect on which systems which will have to give way. How can you encourage people into a more generous and just space. How can you bring them into constructive dialogue with that which is threatening so something new becomes possible which includes them?

A final telltale mark of innovation I want to mention is that **innovations become traditions over time.** Those who once denounced Jane Addams as “a factor in a movement to destroy civilization and Christianity ” came to recognize her as a tireless builder of democracy. The work she began as a simple gesture of hospitality in a city slum became one of the great social movements in modern America – the settlement house movement- which has us all gathered here today.

Several years ago, I was running a public program which included an evening on the work of Jane Addams. A young Mexican immigrant sitting next to me commented in the Q and A section of the program: “Boy, we need her around Chicago today!!”

What can we say of Chicago and America at the turn of this century? Certainly we are a more prosperous city and nation. Unemployment is low. Important social movements have helped protect individual rights and social welfare.

But public life is in disarray. Public education is failing many of our children. Discrimination by race, economic status and ethnicity has become institutionalized in patterns of housing, neighborhood demographics, and political boundaries. Family, neighborhood and community ties have weakened. Apathy, addiction and violence point to a loss of hope and the cancerous internalization of widespread images of disorder and decay. Many people isolated within segregated communities and mindsets can't imagine themselves as meaningfully connected to others who are different. Isolation has led to a lack of imagination and confidence about what is possible, even in a city like Chicago known historically as a place of extraordinary innovation. Civic and political participation is in decline.

The report of the National Commission on Civic Renewal says, “Too many of us have become passive and disengaged. Too many of us lack confidence in our ability to make basic moral and civic judgments, to join our neighbors to do the work of community, to make a difference. Never have we had so many opportunities for participation yet rarely have we felt so powerless. In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators.... Today in our democracy the core issue is not leadership; it is citizenship....”

Jane Addams had a vivid interest in developing citizens. She knew that rich democracy required meaningful connections between a broad range of people and institutions, and active engagement in the work of justice. Today, we join organizations by mail or Internet and view check writing as civic engagement; Robert Putnam from the Kennedy School recently noted that we are becoming economic units rather than social activists. Innovation is again required. How can we work together to mobilize and harness the imagination, hope and hidden assets within institutions and communities so citizens become more actively engaged in creating their own future?

I think the key is to give citizens a stake in their community's future by encouraging the expression of their own civic imagination and by equipping them with practical tools to translate that imagination into a visible community difference.

Everyone has dreams. Even those whom life has battered. Dreams become stronger when brought into public view. When people are held accountable to their hope, new things can happen. The challenge is to unlock the hope, build on it, connect it to the hope and experience of others so it becomes fruitful and lifegiving.

I was recently teaching a class of Public Allies and was asked to work with them on their visions for community change in Chicago. One young man came to me privately and told me he did not want to do the exercise because he had promised himself not to dream anymore "since dreaming only leads to disappointment." I asked him whether he had any children and he said that he and his wife were expecting their first child that year. "Is there anything on your block," I asked, "that is good enough for you now but won't feel good enough anymore once that child arrives – something you could do something about?" He said he could think of several things like that. I asked if he would be willing, instead of the assignment everyone else was doing writing down their big dreams for Chicago, to instead write down that one simple action he could take on his own block. He smiled and said "I get it! If everyone did those few simple things, the whole city would be different." I smiled back and he went to work. When the whole class debriefed their dream visions, he had drawn a large unity symbol. "That is a BIG dream!" I exclaimed. "Yes," he said, "that is the problem. I do dream big but want to see my dreams happen."

Over the past seven years, IMAGINE CHICAGO has worked to challenge and equip people and institutions to understand, imagine and create the future they value. Working in partnership with local organizations -- schools, churches, block clubs, museums, community groups -- IMAGINE CHICAGO organizes and implements imaginative civic projects, with institutional and community impact, that create meaningful connections across generations, cultures, and neighborhoods and which develop responsible citizenship. Through a series of citywide initiatives, the people of Chicago --including kids, recently arrived immigrants, teachers, community activists, religious leaders, corporate executives --are getting engaged in creating a new way forward for their communities.

Like Hull House, our work began simply by engaging people in conversation that transcended boundaries of race, age, economics, geography and class.

Two pilot programs were designed and implemented in 1993-1994: a citywide "appreciative inquiry" process to gather Chicago stories and commitments, and a series of community-based and led processes. In each case, the intent was to give young adults and community builders in Chicago opportunities to share their hopes and commitments in a setting of mutual respect. The process was designed to use intergenerational teams, led by a young person in the company of an adult mentor, to interview business, civic, and cultural leaders, about the future of their communities and of Chicago. Fifty youth-at-risk interviewed 150+ adult "glue" in Chicago. Questions focused on high point experiences as citizens and hopes for the city's future. Kids saw possibility. Hopes of elders were refreshed. The kids wrote thank you letters back to their interviewees summarizing the vision and hope they had "caught" in the interview. Some of those letters got framed and posted on the wall.

Intergenerational appreciative inquiry proved very inspiring and motivating. Adult commitments were refreshed. Hope came alive. New possibilities for engagement were imagined and shared. And the process was successful in establishing a lively sense of shared civic identity, creating effective methods for constructive intergenerational dialogue, and expanding the sense among the young people that they could make a difference.

But Imagine Chicago learned that dialogue was only a first step – of understanding what was possible, and imagining where that could lead. Structures were needed within which to create that future. Imagine Chicago's subsequent initiatives were designed to give participants a chance to be city creators in concrete and sustained ways.

Since the first Imagine Chicago dialogues in 1993, Imagine Chicago initiatives have expanded to include work in more than 40 neighborhoods and to create partnerships with more than 100 community organizations and schools. Working in consultative partnerships, Imagine Chicago provides a framework for individuals and organizations to recognize and build their own capacity to make a civic contribution as they consider three simple questions.

*What is? What could be? What will be?*

I'll give you two concrete examples of innovative projects that have arisen out of this simple process and then share some strategies we use in going about our work that we think have helped promote innovative thinking and effective civic engagement.

Two core programs of Imagine Chicago focus on renewing public education, developing and connecting community leaders and revitalizing communities through intergenerational and intercultural collaborations.

The ***Urban Imagination Network*** designed and facilitated by Imagine Chicago, links six Chicago public schools and five major museums in a comprehensive structure to improve reading comprehension. Each school partners with a museum to engage students in the creation of museum-style exhibits in the content areas of science and social studies. This five-year development process involves students, teachers, parents, and museum and university educators, and builds the capacity of each participant:

- Students *understand* through doing focused research and organizing their ideas, and *imagine* and *create* through making visual displays from which others can learn.
- Parents discuss substantive ideas in the same areas their children are exploring in science and social studies. In addition, they learn effective reading comprehension strategies they can use with their children. They develop competence and interest in helping with exhibits and field trips.
- School administrators learn an asset-based approach to planning and the integration of visual, interactive learning throughout the curriculum
- Teachers develop professionally in monthly forums and summer workshops which helps them integrate museum approaches and content into their teaching.
- Museum educators learn from each other and design educational programs consistent with school curriculum priorities.
- And the broader community makes connections through school-community events in which the student's work is showcased.

While implementation of this approach in the participating schools is still a work in process, early results are encouraging. Children are getting interested in their work. They are talking about pyramids over lunch. The teachers are discovering multiple intelligences in their students that were not being tapped using more traditional approaches. The school is becoming a learning community where intelligence is now visible. Importantly, the children's (and their parents') creativity is being developed in a way which is building their capacity to understand, to think, to organize, and to teach others.

The students in these schools, and their parents, are learning to read and write their city. They are becoming civically literate. They are becoming city designers and creators. As their competence and creativity develop, we can challenge them to think about holistic city design—how to change their street and their city taking into account sustainable development, community capacities, their talent, imagination and commitment, that which gives life.

**IMAGINE CHICAGO also creates and leads programs to build leadership skills that impact the development of communities.** Another core program, *Citizen Leaders*, engages citizens of a neighborhood in imagining and planning low-cost, sustainable community innovations that improve the quality of life for local residents. Participants form a team and design and create projects with their teams—based on what they see as valuable to the community, and building on community assets they have identified.

Citizen Leaders are nominated by schools, churches, community groups, and past participants, mostly in at-risk communities in Chicago. A nominee is somebody who has shown willingness to be involved in the community, has concrete ideas for the community, and is looking for a way to get involved. Participants are from many ethnic backgrounds and have ranged in age from 13 to 65.

Citizen Leaders begin by answering questions which help them identify the assets of their neighborhoods and their own particular talents. They involve at least six other volunteers in the process within a longer-term structure, which consists of 10 workshops over five months. During

this time, Citizen Leaders and their teams receive the tools and training needed to convert their vision into a sustained community project. They move from being designers to creators of a change, which they value and in which they are willing to invest themselves.

The process of asking positive questions and identifying and planning a community project is captured in a Community Innovation Guide created by IMAGINE CHICAGO. Participants use this guide to organize the project planning process. In bi-weekly forums, Citizen Leaders learn from each other's experience and example. In the *Citizen Leader* workshops, they are active learners; in their neighborhoods, as head of a project team, they are leaders. Leaders and their groups are provided \$500 seed grants for project implementation.

In the first three years of the program, citizen leaders have created 75 low-cost innovative community projects in 15 communities while developing their own communication, organizing and citizenship skills. Projects have included block clubs, community gardens, after-school groups, youth groups, adopt-a-grandparent programs, arts classes, youth forums, and an open-mike youth coffeehouse.

The most successful Citizen Leaders projects have been sustained over time in cases where strong connections were established with neighborhood organizations. Four Citizen Leaders in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago created one of the best examples of such a connection. The Citizen Leaders, who developed a block club, teen coffeehouse project, youth group, and intergenerational softball league, paired with the Westside Health Authority, a community organization, and started a group called *Every Block is a Village*. In the past two years *Every Block is a Village* organized 37 block clubs to address community-wide concerns. The group has targeted 30 more blocks to organize and even more growth is anticipated.

While these types of projects could be delivered to a community from the outside, local leadership and ownership in both design and implementation help residents realize a different potential within themselves and their neighbors. Opening the design process encourages everyone to contribute. Innovation is often the result. Sharing and working together toward positive images of a community's future unleashes energy and commitment. People recognize the particular value that they represent and take ownership of the process. The community sifts through the variety of possible solutions for the best ideas. They move to action with the ideas that have commitment and energy behind them. The resulting visible accomplishments lead others looking at these neighborhoods to see a different possibility for community leadership and civic engagement in communities whose public image has been negative.

In cities throughout the world, Imagine Chicago is discovering that the inventory of the possible expands by designing and facilitating processes, especially which cross generations, in which people begin to see themselves as able to create the future in a positive way for themselves and their communities. As people develop connections that are life-giving to them, and as their own very particular and special contribution is valued, their civic imagination is given a place to take root and make a difference. It's possible to create a space where hope flourishes—a space which is *about the possible* where citizens of every level in the city are able to make a difference that changes the way the city thinks.

This work is happening all over the world. Citizens everywhere are wrestling to find ways to connect their gifts to their place in ways that inspire others and change what's possible. In December, I spent several very encouraging days in Novi Sad working with civic leaders from eight cities in Northern Yugoslavia on creating an IMAGINE VOJVODINA network. The work was sponsored by the Soros Foundation who are searching for ways to bring hope and commitment alive in cities where problems and scarcity are much more obvious, and have more authority, than constructive civic action. Through constructive dialogue within and across city teams, participants identified the most critical arenas for collective work as economic development, positive human relations, vital democracy, and healthy environment. Their current design task is to create positive questions for a citywide inquiry process that will inspire broad public interest and collective action in those areas. They are thinking through how to involve and connect as many people as possible in those efforts. They recognize the vital importance of countering the mindset of deconstruction which is a by-product of a long civil war and communist legacy.

Let me close with a few words about how we go about our work because I think the approach holds some clues as to why innovation has often been the result.

- **We work in partnership with local individuals and organizations.** Why partnerships? Not only can more be accomplished, and the whole system kept in view, **new ideas often arise out of uncommon partnerships.** Individuals and institutions all have particular vocations, unique gifts to contribute, the sharing of which is essential to the flourishing of our common life. Where projects can be created that build the capacity of each participant, those project innovations build confidence and competence for change, and can actually begin to change the whole system.
- **We build on where life and energy are already at work,** involving people who want to make a difference and helping them identify the foundations within their experience upon which even greater possibilities can be built. An essential dimension of this is the power of positive questions and framing, inquiring into affirmative topics that matters in ways that build on the best of the past. This approach is now well documented in a body of research called Appreciative Inquiry. Some of the foundations of AI as it relates to community work include that
  - a community moves in the direction of the questions you ask. It is therefore essential to consider that in setting topics for meetings and conversations, you want to set a constructive and orienting agenda around possibilities that matter
  - dialogue is enriched by opportunities for constructive interactions across boundaries
  - when people share stories of what's working, and what's been most valuable and energizing, they will recognize that as a **trustworthy foundation on which to build even more**
  - you grow the possibility by growing the imagination in dialogue. Knowledge is relational and our identity and understanding of life are reconstituted in every encounter with people and ideas.

- **We identify individuals who have the potential to be change agents in their organizations, institutions and communities, and give them appropriate development tools and opportunities to make a difference,**

Citizenship is not about expertise but about commitment.

- **We keep the whole in view,** intentionally building an intergenerational and intercultural network of individuals and organizations committed to developing a vital citywide community and a positive future for Chicago’s children.
- **We expect the best from everyone and hold them accountable.** Like friendship, our practice is capacity oriented. Friendship provides a great working model for the kind of relationships necessary to develop a vibrant city – connected and committed individuals who recognize, appreciate, and celebrate each other’s unique gifts. It is empowering to offer **people ways to connect their particular gifts to the community they care about.**

The National Commission on Civic Renewal also suggested some ways forward which I’d like to cite in closing because they are remarkably congruent with the pioneering work of Hull House as well as the work Imagine Chicago is also struggling to do. *“We believe that the capacity for democratic citizenship must be nurtured in institutions such as families, neighborhoods, schools, faith communities, local governments~ and political movements—and therefore, that our democracy must attend carefully to the health of these institutions.... We believe that building democracy means individuals, voluntary associations, private markets, and the public sector working together — not locked in battle.... We believe that democracy means not only discussing our differences, but also undertaking concrete projects with our fellow citizens to achieve common goals.”*

These beliefs fueled the work of Jane Addams a century ago. She imagined and created ways for the residents of Hull House to be active participants – bringing their talents to bear on pressing issues but also to create a flourishing cultural and community life. Hull House was everybody’s work – rich and poor, newcomer and well-established, young and old. It was the work of individuals and of institutions and required new connections between them. It was highly particular and yet also worked through policy changes and legislation. It was socially innovative – fostering new innovations, changing structures, creatively destroying existing systems – and in the process becoming a new way of life.

You, as settlement house professionals, stand in a very proud tradition of innovation. The challenge now, as it was 110 years ago, is to create meaningful ways for citizens to participate where their very particular talents can be brought to bear on the pressing challenges of their lives and of their communities. You have an opportunity to serve as agents of empowerment for developing the creativity of people whose imagination has been overlooked and for creating those uncommon connections that expand what’s possible. I hope you will challenge yourselves to

- Understand what is
- Imagine what can be

- And Create what will be.

Seek uncommon partners. Ask powerful, positive questions. Grow the possibility. And remarkable new things will come alive.

Thank you!

**Example:** As you reflect on being agents of innovation, I'd like to ask you to share at your tables your reflections on two questions:

Think of a project you've been involved in that has been a personal highpoint...a time where you said to yourself that people really can connect, really **can** make a difference...a time you were part of creating something new.

What got created?

What contributed to making the innovation possible?

What were the vital connections that got made? Why did they matter? Where did they lead?

What do you now see as possible as a result of those connections?

What is an innovation that you think holds particular promise for transcending boundaries?

What current practices now stand in need of innovation?