



# Living with Purpose

***Dr. Martin Brokenleg***

Lifelong learning in our hearts occurs through positive and negative experiences. *Experiential learning* teaches our inner world while *intellectual learning*, which we call knowledge, teaches our mind. We do not have a good term in English for inner learning. Some societies call this kind of learning capacities, while other societies call it virtues. I prefer the term *formation*. Formation is a deep learning in our hearts, our emotions, and our psyches or our souls. It is there that we learn the purpose of living well.

This level of learning is also where we build resiliency—the strength of spirit that allows a person to thrive in the face of adversity as well as success. We can help foster resiliency by providing experiences that teach hardiness and survivability. Living with purpose creates resiliency. Dying with purpose shows an astonishing level of resiliency.

I do not often listen to pop music, but I have heard of a very popular singing group called Tragically Hip. They are a Canadian band, and the vividness of the name stuck in my mind. Their lead singer, Gord Downie, stunned the entertainment world when he revealed in May 2016, that he had incurable brain cancer. He announced a farewell concert tour that began on the west coast and finished in central Canada. Knowing the trajectory of Gord Downie's life made each show poignant, and every venue was filled to capacity. His listeners hung on his every word and song.

His final concert was in Kingston, Ontario. Knowing that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was in the audience that night, Gord Downie said, "We're in good hands, folks, real good hands."

Gord Downie then turned to an issue that has mattered to him personally for a long time—Canada's history with Indigenous people. "He [meaning the prime minister] cares about the people way up North, that we were trained our entire lives to ignore, trained our entire lives to hear not a word of what's going on up there. And what's going on up there ain't good. It's maybe worse than it's ever been...[but] we're going to get it fixed and we got the guy to do it, to start to help... It's going to take us 100 years to figure out what went on up there, but...we're going to figure it out, you're going to figure it out."

For some time Gord Downie has been haunted by the memory of a 12-year-old First Nations boy, Chanie Wenjack, who died from hunger and exposure when he ran away from a residential school and tried to get to his home in Marten Falls, Ontario, about 400 kilometers north-east of Thunder Bay. Chanie Wenjack's body was found near the railway tracks not far from Kenora, Ontario.

Gord Downie says, "I never knew Chanie but I will always love him... Chanie haunts me. His story is Canada's story. We're not the country we thought we were. History will be re-written. We are all accountable." When Downie recently visited the Wenjack family in their home he said, "Canada is not Canada. The next hundred years are going to be painful as we come to know Chanie Wenjack and

the thousands like him—as we find out about ourselves, about all of us— but only when we do can we truly call ourselves Canada."

Gord Downie created a solo album and an 88-page graphic novel about Chanie Wenjack. An animated film about Chanie was shown on CBC in October 2016. Gord Downie speaks about First Nations history and the residential school era whenever he is interviewed in these last days of his life. Downie has a purpose for this portion of his life, and he uses the characteristics of this time in his life to support his purpose.

### ***Resiliency is strength of spirit that motivates a person when adverse factors are at work.***

Resiliency is strength of spirit that motivates a person when adverse factors are at work. It is resiliency that helps a toddler get up once again after falling innumerable times while

learning to walk. It is resiliency that urges a basketball player to dribble toward the basket again after missing dozens of previous layups. It is resiliency of spirit that allows a person to open her heart once again after the end of a loving relationship.

An important foundation for resiliency is the giving of oneself to something outside one's self. This is the reason generosity is a natural human reaction in every person from infancy forward. We see it in hospital nurseries when infants join one who starts crying. Nearby infants hear the initial cry and add their voices as a means of helping. Children in a primary classroom, listening in as a classmate describes a painful fall on the playground, will tear up and some will start to whimper as an act of generosity toward the one who was injured. Any of us, hearing of a tragedy in the family next door, will go to their aid with offers of help and comfort. This generosity is a normal human response and is not a factor that must be imposed.

Every society in the world has some teaching about being generous to others, even if only to those of their own group. Every religion in the world teaches generosity toward one's own group as well as to those who are strangers and undeserving. These teachings are all admonitions to have a deep purpose in life. It is thinking and living with purpose that creates the inner strength that we identify as resiliency.

Purpose is not some alien quality that we impose on others. It is an innate motivation that seems embedded in human nature. The altruistic desire that has been noted among toddlers has also been recognized by Abraham Maslow as a high need among all adults.

Studies in anthropology document a virtually universal motivation to help others. The spiritual values of nearly all communities in the world promote living with generosity. Psychology finds that psychic health is promoted by altruism. Twelve-Step programs suggest that recovery is promoted by the person engaging in efforts to pass on the very qualities that are now a part of the new life in recovery. These are all admonitions to live with purpose.

CF Learning’s Model of Leadership and Service depicts the basic building blocks of resiliency, and *Purpose* is one of the components. (Figure 1 below shows an image reflecting an indigenous perspective of the model.) We know that providing learning experiences that teach generosity as a purpose in life teach resiliency. Generosity as purpose is

not only a philosophy of living, it is a source of learning strategies. Activities in and out of school that teach purpose also build resiliency.

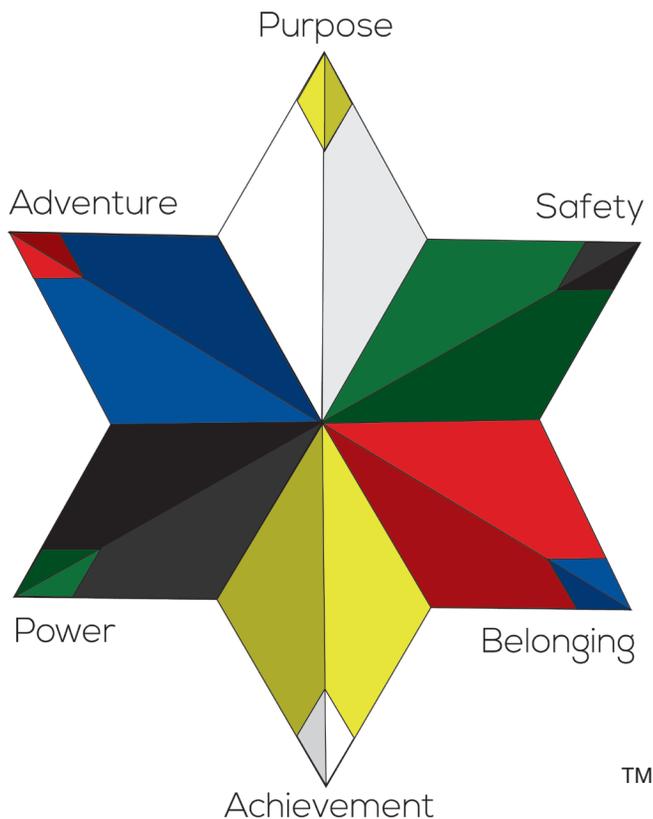
***Expressing one’s generosity is a connection with one’s true purpose.***

In a large US city, teachers told me of their experience. A community program designed to help delinquent youth receive their equivalency high school diplomas had a hard time keeping their students engaged in their learning tasks. Many of the youth were in the program because they were ordered to do so by the courts or by their social workers. They were seriously reluctant learners. Even so, the instructors who worked with these students designed the program to include the teaching of resiliency.

The learning space for the GED program was housed in a large building that the city had reclaimed for social programs. A daycare for children and a program for elders in need of support were also housed there. On a frigid winter day the fire alarms sounded and the students bolted out of the room. The teachers grabbed their coats and were commiserating about how their students would scatter and not come back to the school for the day. Imagine their surprise when they found their high school students had gathered the children and elderly people on the downwind side of the building, and they had sheltered them with their own coats. Not a single youth left the area. The teachers decided that day that their students had learned the purpose to their lives at this point in time.

Those teachers had made effective use of a service-learning activity in their classroom. They fostered older and more experienced students to be mentors for younger incoming students who were less familiar with their study and learning programs. In mentoring the younger children, the older youth experienced their own inner well of goodness and used that energy to help their mentees. Certainly the younger students

**Figure 1: An Indigenous Perspective of The Model of Leadership and Service**



had benefitted by the relationship, but so had the older students benefitted by finding and utilizing their own source of purpose. Feeling their generosity inspired their purpose, and their own resiliency was the final result.

In Canada, reconciliation is a national topic of interest. Gord Downie's admonitions about Chanie Wenjack's tragic death and the necessity for reconciliation are factors in the national purpose of reconciliation. Gord Downie is acting out of a nuanced understanding that his generosity assumes he and Indigenous peoples are equals. True generosity is an act of goodness shared from one equal to another. Because the involved parties are equals, the interchange is mutually nourishing. This would not be the case if the relationship were merely one of benevolence toward inferiors. Canadian reconciliation is not a *new racism* of superiors to inferiors. It is an action of generosity between equals, and so it has a curative energy that bonds and strengthens the parties involved. This is its true purpose, genuine generosity. The outcome is not just warm feelings but rather a bold inner strength resulting from the connections that are reinforced by generosity.

Living with purpose is CF Learning's goal for all youth and adults. Expressing one's generosity is a connection with one's true purpose. Gord Downie has connected Indigenous and Settler peoples in Canada whose history has been troubled. He has raised the specter of purpose in our national life. We know the factors that strengthen us on a personal level and have every reason to believe that purpose and generosity will fortify us at a national level as well.

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