

Tony GENCO

Celebrating our Differences and a Call to Civic Engagement

As Canadians, we engage one another as to what it means to be citizens of the world and what the important issues facing us are. We are creating a society here that is not Europe but it is not the United States either.

Our country constantly searches for its identity generally, as do our communities, yet we seem to find it easier to define ourselves more by what we are not than by what we are. This bolsters us in our inferiority complex when it comes to many parts of the world and our superiority complex when we talk about our country as we define our society as peaceful and tolerant nation.

The challenge is therefore how do we define ourselves as a people, as a society, and as a nation? What is the special way in which the world should view us? What is our brand? Does it have meaning and how do we contribute significantly to the creation of a better world while we celebrate who we are by just being, just living, just making it work? Where do we go from here? How do we grow from here? Who are we?

People still Finding ourselves

I believe that we are a people still finding ourselves. The Canadian nation is one of conquests of a different sort. It is a country of accommodation. It is not a country of war. It is a country of compromise.

But does that compromise mean that we never make direct choices so that we can be safe with ourselves? The roads here are wider and newer than most parts of Europe, yet we replicate American society and claim to be independent of influences and make our own choices.

We aver shunning density and development sprawl, yet we seem in many places to live that way; interestingly, we do not seem to connect nearly as well with our friends South of the border.

When Americans engage, it is with no-holds-barred, no-nonsense responses to issues. We try to have everyone get along and engage the world on our own terms without much understanding of what the consequences of our actions really are for everyone.

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And yet, there are places that we meet: our churches, our malls, where the locals connect, where we can know who we are. We keep our distance, we mind our own business and if we have to talk to someone whom we know, we meet and then discover it is not so bad after all. The odds of doing that in Toronto is harder given the anonymity of the city, but you can run into people that you know and you talk to them and find they do not bite.

Multicultural Harmony

Our multicultural harmony is really a bunch of cells working separately and independently of one another. And this is our sense of self—without conflict, without challenges and without difficulties.

But perhaps *with* too many things that separate us from finding out what the true Canada can be. What more can we do to connect with one another on a human basis right in our own backyards?

Knowing how to do this better here is the key to ensuring that we can make a positive contribution to our world. Understanding ourselves and our place in the world would be the way to make that lasting impression on others that we want to emulate and support.

The boom in growth in our urban communities has brought about a diversity that was certainly not anticipated by our Mothers and Fathers of Confederation. People have made a choice to join us in our new lifestyle.

It does seem, though, that it is more about leaving something behind in favour of something new. It meant leaving a place where there may have been struggles and looking for Canada to be a place of new beginnings.

Improving the Tapestry

It does not seem clear when coming to Canada, however, what those new beginnings really are about. When most people come to Canada they come with the expectation that they can take care of their families and live with those of similar backgrounds together without learning too much about Canada.

In some cases it becomes possible for people to simply speak only their own language and never learn any other. In some places in the United States this is possible too, but it is much more prevalent in Canada.

Why is that? Canada allows herself to become a caretaker of many, but does not have a personality beyond the fact that she does not have a personality. It is crucial that we find a way to join together.

But can we really join together, or will we remain sitting in our own clusters, refusing to connect as one community, prosperous and vibrant and distinctive from other communities?

Are we allowing ourselves not to connect, or is Canada failing us by not doing more than making us a place where we use the land and do not ever really become accepted as communities in good standing that can improve the tapestry of our local community? In the end are we all second-class and there is no first-class citizenry here?

Football (Soccer) World Cup

The weeks surrounding the Football (Soccer) World Cup really brought this matter to a head. In a foreseeable move, some bright entrepreneurial minds came together with the World Cup and started selling flags.

They were so organized that you barely needed to go a block to find a stand at a corner, let alone at your typical plaza. We seem to have found our sense of individual expression by putting up flags of places of our pasts, all connecting to this event that happens every four years.

Unlike the Olympics, though, we see ourselves as members of those communities of our past. One of the good things for me has been that I have had to look up some flags that I had not ever known before to understand more about the person speeding past me on to their next challenge on their personal schedule.

We now can know more about them, at least during the World Cup. But amazingly, almost immediately following the end of the event, all the flags were put away. It was almost as if we were allowed to be patriotic to our past and then we were allowed to forget entirely for the next four years and resort to those that know us.

We were not to tell anyone else who we were anymore for fear that they might get too close to us. Only those who knew us already were allowed again to infiltrate our worlds. Where did all the flags go? And why did not the flags stay up? Perhaps more importantly, why did they have to go up in the first place?

Celebrating our Differences

We can be intrigued by this patriotism by so many. It seems to be very prevalent here. But what is the nature of it? Is it because of a soccer game? Why are we being so patriotic to a land that we had to either abandon or were exiled from for economic or other reasons?

What does this say about our community when we keep looking to other communities we long ago abandoned to find our identity? Or are we crying out for wanting to belong, because we have not found a way to belong here and to be accepted in our own new country beyond ourselves?

Our optimistic side might think that this is a simple form of self-expression that is a celebration of our differences. At least that is what we say out loud: that our Canadianism demands us to be accepting and tolerant of this expression of diversity as it is what makes us whole.

It is this desire to be tolerant that allows us to accept all the nations of the world who have come to join us in their new beginnings. But we do not really plant roots in this new society, and we long to be a part of the past that we found to be problematic and not a part of whom we should be today.

So when I see these flags, I actually picture them as the proud maple leaf and our own Canadian flag flying proudly where we can express ourselves in such a manner. It is certainly something that we can be proud of, that riots do not take place when certain countries are more successful than others.

Perhaps that is because people stay in their areas of dominance and do not go into the

areas of others. Many of the countries people are praising would not allow any form of expression whatsoever. Those countries assert their own identities over everyone else's. This is how we define ourselves.

Looking to the Future and Respecting the Past

All of this was in fact happening during a very special weekend for our country. Our country that was formed from more than a century of welcoming people from every part of the world needs to be acknowledged, too.

We have a country that looks to the future and respects the past, but is not a prisoner of it. But it seems many of us still long for a past that we left behind. What more can we do to live in our present, rather than be controlled by a false nostalgia for our past?

The real Canada of tomorrow is here. You need only to look around in order to see that future generations of new immigrants from the next fifty years will actually dominate the landscapes.

Where what we now think are unique and perhaps *non-Canadian* last names will be accepted as naturally Canadian. I hope that this will be the case in my lifetime. We need to continue to strive to create an awareness that the future of Canada needs to be and will be defined by the immigrants that are present today, more so than in any other period in our history.

And it is likely that rather than continuing to operate in our own niches of comfort and safety, we now need to engage one another more directly and forcefully to look around and share our collective sense of purpose that goes beyond our own individual needs and expectations of survival.

We belong here and we can make a difference right here and right now without being ashamed of our struggles and sacrifices of the past; but neither should we be trapped by those same things.

A Wonderful Experiment

We need to chart a new future that is about our new wonderful experiment of Canada. This is one that comes together with a renewed sense of understanding along with tolerance, but does more than that.

It requires us to have a common purpose that is not divided by language or race or culture or region, but one that allows us to believe in this land as more than a place where we have an opportunity to engage—as really a place to celebrate.

We stand for something that is defining who we are and what we want to give back to a world that is in need of hope, that needs us to take a few risks and stop being so safe because we are afraid to offend everyone, including ourselves. Perhaps if we talked a bit more with one another, we might see more Canadian flags around us.

The first thing we need to do is to truly understand that there is something more to our land than land itself. Getting to know one another becomes the basis for our contribution to a world of new beginnings and not just a country where we park ourselves so that we can go home later.

Ironically, Canada was never a country that was borne out of pragmatism. With the great geographical divides and economic forces, Canada should not have worked at all.

Yet people of vision and character strove to make a difference and to believe that we could do something that was different and special and that could be attractive to the world.

And yet as those around us have taken risks, Canada never seemed to want to do that. It meant that many nations passed us by and we watched the agenda unfold around us and we contributed incrementally to it.

We became pragmatic almost for the sake of it without even knowing it. Going forward, can we as a civil society really operate on mere pragmatism? Most will realize that our form of pragmatism is not really pragmatic and new alignments of political and geographic interests need to be created. Does that mean the death of Canada in the long run? Hopefully not.

Canadian Language

We love this country. Why? Because it is one of the few countries where you can have everything at your doorstep and not be a prisoner of your past. Your last name is not a limiting condition unless you desire it to be.

There is a business culture that you need to adjust to and to develop, but you can help change it, if you have the courage of your convictions. The opportunities to take all that is good about the country and contribute it as a model for the world are at our doorstep.

The psychology of most Canadians, though, is to remain passive without engaging these opportunities. The two languages become scary for many and yet for me the two languages are what really helps bridge the divide between Anglo- and Latin-based cultures.

I would love to see the day when Canadians outside of Montreal can converse in a new French and English and when neither is our official language. Our official language should be Canadian. We have mastered the ability to listen at this stage in our evolution. The next step is the time to act.

I believe that this approach will strengthen who we can become and what we can do to make the world a better place. Is our nation ready for this bold and innovative challenge? Are we afraid for what is to come? Probably not.

But who will stand up and fight for Canada? Who will help and create a new and improved Canada? It can and must be the immigrants of this past half-century. I have no doubt that they have the ability to do that. Will they accept the challenge? This remains the true outstanding issue for our nation.

A Microcosm of Engagement

Back to the pre-World Cup decision period, someone at work put an Italian flag on my car. While grateful, I took it down. I am proud of my heritage, although I am part Spanish and French too, and share it with my daughter and my newborn son.

That is my yesterday. But now I am a Canadian. A Canadian is a person who engages and celebrates the complexity and diversity of the world, who does not judge what they see, but learns from it, shapes it and makes it better.

That is also the opportunity we have in our Canada: to create a microcosm of

engagement and learning and celebration and hope throughout our community, and a model society for the entire world.

I love my heritage, but I will not be prisoner to it. I love Canada more. This is my home and native land. Let us be proud of our future and our land of new beginnings. We will create it in every community we live in through our actions and activities and through being bold and innovative.

The next phase is the new and improved Canada. A Canada that is built beyond the physical and emotional barriers that we create; that we can engage and celebrate tolerance, but that makes choices and takes a stand through its innovation, passion and commitment to make itself a microcosm of the world; and that can truly lead in making a difference for people by taking the responsibility for change from within and without its borders.

A Revolution of Will

It must start from within, as we have all the ingredients here. We have generations of immigrants, we have an economy that continues to thrive and prosper and we have a society that is longing for growth from adolescence to adulthood.

As we learn more and continue to build together a community we can all be proud of, together we will create the new and improved Canada and the real world that is within our borders that is a model of how to strive for progress and hope for a better engagement of who we are, where we have been, but mostly where we are going.

I believe that we will all rise to the challenge. We really do not have a choice. We have been given such an important opportunity that we may be the last chance for the world to be the change we constantly talk about and want to celebrate.

There are many places throughout the world that are in need of hope. That hope is here in the way we treat those conflicts, not there as many of them cannot be helped where they come from. They make the difference by being the place where they can learn that the differences that they define in other places are differences that do not exist here.

Our civic pride and our ability to stand up and be counted as a community will become our calling card to the world that Canada can and will become the next and perhaps true superpower, not because of the economic clout it directly has or the amount of guns or soldiers in its army, but in her ability by sheer force of will and opportunity, that she can demonstrate how it is all done and be the envy of the world. We will be part of a revolution of will.

