

"The Best Laid Schemes..."

by
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With a daughter studying in Victoria, and with other family and friends who call Vancouver Island home, I have lost count of the times in the last two years I have driven the route from Vancouver to the Tsawwassen ferry terminal. And it never seemed to fail that I would drive, racing against traffic and time, to board our planned sailing. Most often we were successful, with only minutes to spare. However, a recent trip was delayed when, on that particular morning, I lost the race.

We had a reservation for the first morning crossing. It was the first day of spring, and we set out in the dark on deserted highways. Even with counterflow in effect through the tunnel, I raced the clock with confidence. In the final approach to the terminal, drivers play the odds when choosing a ticket window. Several kiosks flash the destination name, but which line will move most quickly? I made my choice, and then fumed as the line of vehicles to my right advanced, while I remained motionless with three cars ahead of me. When I finally pulled up to the ticket window, our designs and commitments for the day were thrown into disarray when the ticket agent said the time for reservations “has ended”. We missed the boat... by four minutes. To further salt the wound, the agent informed us we may have a “one sailing wait” as the next scheduled ferry may already be full. As I drove into my designated lane, with a potential wait of four hours, I thought of Robert Burns.

As a lover of literature, I appreciate the economy and rich meaning achieved through allusions. And a line of Burns’ poetry has certainly become a proverb, if not an idiom, for our times. In his poem “To a Mouse”, written more than two hundred years ago, the speaker expresses sorrow for having destroyed the home of a “tim’rous beastie” with his plow. The mouse is made vulnerable, its winter shelter destroyed. The poem offers reflection on the circumstances both “o’ Mice an’ Men”. As a lover of literature, I cannot help myself, and I audibly correct those who misquote Burns’ insightful observation of our existence: it is our *schemes* which are, at times, painfully upended by the indifference of fate... not our *plans*.

It may be a subtle difference and, like so much of language and literature, a debatable point. However, for the sake of this reflection, consider a scheme to be larger, systematic, and more detailed than a mere plan. A scheme implies a calculation and contrivance for a result, not always nefarious. A plan may lack dimension and detail. ‘Plan’ is not the word Burns chose, and it fails to grasp the human investment that is stymied by life’s unpredictable turns. The unforeseen turn in the spring of 2020 is difficult to quantify in terms of its impact. Added to the global pandemic, the layered effects of extreme climate events and international conflicts further challenge any known metrics. Combined, they may defy calculation. We will each have to take inventory as we persist to understand our passage through this time in our history and who we have become, personally, professionally, and collectively. And here, at the end of my term as president for the BC Principals’ & Vice-Principals’ Association, I have been taking myself to account... an inventory of two years served.

In June of 2019, I was excited to be President-Elect following the BCPVPA elections. In the mix of emotions felt – which included humility, trepidation, and gratitude – I began scheming, but not in an evil genius way. Our Association held grand aspirations and significant priorities – big rocks – for our members, and the work of school leaders was more complex and voluminous than it ever had been. Advocacy and representation for Principals and Vice-Principals with

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government and our sector partners was also more complex and sensitive than perhaps it had ever been.

Of particular concern for school leaders was the impact of the 2017 Memorandum of Agreement, which served to provide a process for the restoration of language deleted from teacher collective agreements. Members' concerns were not so much for the restoration of contract language as they were for the dramatically increased demand upon administrative time that came as a result.

The numbers of Teachers Teaching On-Call (TTOC) were all but depleted by the thousands of classroom teacher vacancies created to address restored language. BC Principals and Vice-Principals were spending significant portions of each day reorganizing schedules to cover for staff absences left unfilled. It was frequent and common that 'fails to fill' were ultimately filled by school leaders, which added teaching responsibilities to the day, and left less and less time for all other responsibilities. This stressor was taking its toll, and the Association was concerned for our members' health and mental well-being. This was a big rock.

Contributing to the challenge of being a school-based leader in BC was the inequitable landscape across sixty school districts with respect to terms and conditions of employment. Remarkable variance can be found between districts when it comes to certain clauses of Principals' and Vice-Principals' personal services contracts, clauses which arguably should be universal. This patchwork of agreements exposed members, leaving many vulnerable. Since 2014, the Association has advocated with government for a

contract negotiation model which better serves our members and the system, as a whole. This, too, was a big rock.

The fall came and went, winter break passed, the new semester started, and we were eagerly awaiting the arrival of spring break. The new role I was about to assume for the Association was looming on the horizon, and I spent as much time as I could scheming for how I would pick up the challenge and move some rocks. And then it was Friday the 13th, in March. As we dismissed for spring break, I overheard a student in grade 12 say, while closing her locker, "This might be the last time I close my locker in high school." She said it aloud, to no one in particular, with a tone of incredulity. I remember the words of Robert Burns coming to mind then, too, as much for myself as for my student. The days ahead confirmed suspicions that some new big rocks were about to take precedence over all others.

So it was when I stepped into July of 2020 with a very uncertain and much altered path before me. While living and working through a pandemic would dominate nearly every aspect of the day, nearly every interaction and thought, July arrived on the heels of a watershed moment: the murder of George Floyd. A demand for all of society to unlearn a colonial history and to make Anti-Racism, equity, and justice paramount, would neither be ignored nor deferred, even for a pandemic. This voice called for all – especially someone like me – to prioritize this work, beginning within. Through the passing months, the voice gained volume and urgency as Canadians uncovered truths long known by Indigenous communities, and a Minister forged ahead with an action plan. As the number of my days passed, the rocks along this pathway of mine cast long shadows, and I felt their weight. I am about to step into another July, and out of this path. Looking over my shoulder at the rocks, I strain my eyes and it is difficult to see if they have moved.

For certain, the volume and complexity of school leadership has only increased in the last two years, and not entirely due to COVID-19. The work of

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Principals and Vice-Principals in their communities has been spotlighted, and we have heard sincere appreciation for this work. The critical role of school leaders is perhaps better understood now than before; however, the demands of this work remain at unsustainable levels, and the big rock of health and mental well-being persists. As does the big rock of negotiation agency, and the prospect of a fair and equitable model for securing conditions of employment that promote *thriving*. We have felt deep disappointment as many hopes have not been realized. However, with renewed partner relations, I believe – if I squint – that I can detect a forward movement of this rock.

The work of Anti-Racism, equity, and inclusion remains, too. Personally and professionally, I have learned a great deal, and my movements through this world are not the same. The Association, too, has learned much, both from within our membership and from our national colleagues. While this big rock remains, it has neither been diminished nor ignored, and I detect movement. In addition to professional learning opportunities which focus upon leading for equity, the BCPVPA has established an Anti-Racism Advisory Committee. These initial steps are modest and tentative, but introduce momentum for future action.

Glancing backward, that field of rocks is also littered with the opportunities I had to both spend time with, and learn from, the remarkable school leaders in BC. While the schemes I envisioned for how these times would look were much altered and impacted by life in a pandemic, they have been none the less rewarding.

The virtual medium allowed for more members to participate in meetings, particularly for those distant Chapters. In some cases, a virtual option allowed a greater frequency for meeting than in earlier times. And due to restrictions, the fewer opportunities to connect in person with members were profoundly meaningful. I was very happy to play second fiddle, and be the excuse to bring people together... people who were much happier to see each other than to see me!

And time and time again, as I met with members online and in person, a line from something I read surfaced. It is a line I have kept on my desktop for most of the last two years. It comes from an article written by Carol Kauffman, and it reminds leaders that "Without Compassion, Resilient Leaders Will Fall Short" (bit.ly/WCRLWFS). The author emphasizes that leaders must not coldly pass judgement on the people they lead, misreading indicators of stress or uncertainty as weakness. In our system, there are those whose leadership would benefit from Kauffman's lessons; BC's Principals and Vice-Principals are not among them. For two years, you have thought, "about what prepared you for the experiences that have made you stronger," and have used this, "to create an environment for [your communities] to be stronger." The line from Kauffman which I keep on my desktop is an apt description for the school leaders I had the privilege of meeting, the Principals and Vice-Principals putting everything before themselves, even when running on fumes: "There are few people with more fortitude than you have. And that means you aren't the normal one here." It means you are exceptional.

I am attracted to metaphors for the same reason I like allusions, and I have been preoccupied with a metaphor for my two years as president. Drawing from images of drilling down and striking paydirt, I entertained the comparison of schemes and plans to excavation or dowsing. And these thoughts inevitably lead me to a story of friends who built a home in the Kootenays. The neighbourhood in which my friends built their home is not serviced with town water. Each of the homes built along this stretch of gravel road



must provide their own water. To this end, my friends decided to drill a well. The property was properly 'witched' with willow branches, and the drilling began. This neighbourhood is perched at the western edge of the Rocky Mountains. Perhaps because of this proximity to the iconic mountains, a clean supply of water eluded my friends. They finally had to make the difficult decision to pivot and stop the drilling, leaving them with a hole in the ground.

This metaphor may at first seem ill-suited and somewhat negative. But the more I reflect upon it, the more I am drawn to it. Our best laid schemes "gang aft agley," and we are compelled to evaluate, re-set, adjust, and continue. And it is the emergence from these experiences that makes us resilient. While after two years the big rocks still litter the pathway, I have confidence the BCPVPA, its leadership, and its members will take up their weight and move them as far as possible.

As you read this, I may well be on my journey home, returning to BC valleys, "the moon could be rolled in." Once there, I will immediately embark on another journey, as I assume a new role within my district; I am excited for this opportunity. My journey as president for the BC Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association will recede in time and memory. Like all experience, the sharp contours of its images will blur and dull with age; however, the poignant emotions of these two years will remain keen. And, when evoked, they will remind me of the blessings I realized in the service of our members. In all the words I have written, and all the words I can know, a simple pair best serve to convey my sincere gratitude: thank you.

***Darren Danyluk is the
2020-2022 President
of the BCPVPA.***

***We thank Darren for his
committed work, and the
words that he has shared with
our members in each issue
of Principl(ed).***



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