

## ***Story Money Impact: Funding Media for Social Change***

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Excerpt: "Preface, My Spark"

I'm not even sure of his name. But he is tall and rugged and somehow perfectly fits the bill. Apparently he's spent hours combing the Cortes Island beach for just the right goodies - some rope, a small flat piece of driftwood, dried seaweed (or some such fragile clump). The only item he brought to the enterprise was his single blade army knife.

After 20 minutes of crouching over the precious bundle, whittling and notching and spinning and gently blowing - oh, so gently - he straightens his back to stretch and take a nourishing breath. Trying to coax fire out of nature takes not only patience, but stamina. If it were me, I'd be flummoxed by the dozen pairs of eyes around the circle, watching intently, silent. He seems quietly self-assured and leans forward again to resume.

I gaze up at this these on-lookers. Of course any number of them may have a lighter in their pocket. But that's not the point. Although this isn't a summer camp for adults, it can sure feel like it. We're at the Hollyhock Retreat Centre for a conference called Media That Matters. It's a rather analog affair in a digital world. Facilitated sessions in circular wooden buildings, deep conversations during forest walks, shared vegetarian meals, and time spent in the solar-powered ocean-view hot tubs (clothing optional).

There are about 40 of us in total and over the four days we talk for hours. Top of mind are new business models and the current challenges of media financing. Most are documentary filmmakers, wanting to make a difference in the world and they're having a harder time than ever finding money for their work. Hollyhock is meant to be a no-pitch zone, so broadcasters and funders can come as peer participants, but it generally evolves into a slow-pitch zone. Attendees tend to be generous with their knowledge and network.

As part of my job with the National Film Board of Canada, I've been coming to this annual gathering for years. It's a chance to meet new filmmakers, absorb fresh trends, and personally slow down some - take time to reflect on what we produce and what it all means, to the artists and to the public. I wonder though if this might be my last Media That Matters in this capacity. It's been nearly 10 years at the NFB and I'm growing restless.

Making social issues content, with independent directors, with government money, has been a real privilege. I mean, really - I said 'pinch me' for about two years after I got the job. But 10 years anywhere is a long time, and especially so in a publicly funded bureaucracy. I've had the chance to produce powerful films with talented filmmakers, and even on some beautiful - if perhaps too rare - occasions, I've seen glimmers of how they've impacted lives. But they could do so much more. Documentary film can spark real societal change. I know it.

So does this group. We're not simply naïve do-gooders, waiting for this swarthy dude to make magic in the campfire-ring. We're producers, and creators, and entrepreneurs, and we believe in the power of media. We know that a compelling story, expertly told and financially supported, can create impact.

His deft hand movements continue and then there's a small puff of smoke at the centre of the bundle. Again he blows, slow and steady. I'm surprised to find I'm holding my breath and have one hand across my mouth. In my mind I'm chanting 'c'mon, c'mon, c'mon', like my actual survival might depend on this flame. It's catches. There's a spark! But we're not out of the woods yet... He fans it, adds a small stick, and then another in Teepee formation, and gives it more air. Finally a more substantial piece of driftwood is gently placed on top and the small flames lick its sides and grow. We have a fire! People burst into applause and hug each other. It's like the climax of a powerful film. I'm actually fighting back tears.

Though I've enjoyed a number of bonfires on Cortes Island, something about the one that night tasted different. The songs were sweeter, the storytelling more meaningful. Was that the night we saw the massive shooting star while splashing in the phosphorescence at the shore - or am I just getting carried away now?? But honestly, witnessing a man offering his strength, ingenuity and human breath to scavenged objects to create fire, had a real impact on me. It's so elemental.

Like fire, stories are deeply transformative. They have the power to change that which they touch. Turn one thing into another. And like fire they need the right combination of ingredients to create the SPARK. Story. Money. Impact. Beginning that weekend, fusing these three elements together has grown into my mission. This book is a part of fanning those flames...

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