

The Wheel as Political Metaphor
 Presented by Nancy Chaney, Mayor
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Please join me in thanking Professor Rodney Frey and our traveling companions in the Turning of the Wheel series.

Preparing for this talk reminded me of how clunky government organizational structure can be, and how little confidence the public seems to have in politics these days. Endeavoring to change that, at least at the local level, I started with people as the common denominator. I listed what I thought were desirable characteristics in political figures, and envisioned them (us) as components of an interconnected wheel.

When I began this project, I had a sort of geocentric, stereotypically Western image of self (or city) as center. As the concept evolved, I came to see the hub as this dense core of all that has happened—a repository for all that will ever happen—rimmed by the expansive wholeness of being, with our collective contributions as spokes. From the political perspective, the “hub” in this model is central, the cumulative impacts of existence, the heart that sustains us, emotionally, socially, environmentally, and spiritually. The spokes are our experiences and connections to each other over generations, spanning disciplines, across neighborhoods, countries, continents, and time. Tiny bits of the rim symbolize “us,” here and now...ourselves as individuals, the “we” of our communities, the factions and composite of a nation, a generation of people. Wheels also move. They are part of the momentum of life, crossing generations, ecosystems, and socio-political norms. My presentation will focus on life’s journeys, incremental destinations, and some of the traveling companions who have influenced policies, places, and the future.

In a New York Times Op-Ed piece in 2000, just after the Bush-Gore hanging-chad fiasco, the late John Mack, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, wrote about the role of Trickster, the god-like character familiar to many cultures, the troublemaker who changes the status quo when you least expect it. Mack was interested in the transformative visionary experiences that connect spirituality to worldviews outside of the Western materialist paradigm, arguably like spokes in a wheel. Mack wrote, “Trickster is providence’s representative—a kind of savior sent when a society is in crisis and no longer serving the needs of its people...We seem to be living in the kind of historical moment when Trickster does his work. Perhaps he staged our political stalemate to enable new possibilities to emerge...” Mack’s expanded draft was explicit, “Things will have to change. As the discoveries of physics, biology and other scientific disciplines reveal the profound interconnectedness of all life, our social institutions, as always, lag behind. Now it seems this nation is being offered an opportunity to renew itself, to rediscover its promise as a land where all have the chance of living healthy, fulfilling and interesting lives. I suspect we may be headed toward something more collaborative, more authentically inclusive. But we cannot know what will emerge. Uncertainty is one of Trickster’s creative tools.” Trickster is part of the wheel as political metaphor, and accompanies us on our journey.

One takes things with them on a journey and picks up more things along the way. At this place in my journey, I find myself shouldering the stereotypical, not always flattering baggage of what comes with being a politician. That’s not how I set out. Here’s what I started with:

First, the context that rims worldviews of my generation: I'm a Baby Boomer, born in the 1950's, when post-war enthusiasm fueled our Nation to drive hard to be bigger, better, richer, and more powerful than anyone else; and when children responded to classroom alarms by rote—Pavlovian-like—by ducking under our desks and covering our heads for protection from atomic bombs. My grandparents—two generations removed—lived with us.

From that background, I developed acute awareness that materialism is part of American society; a general sense of optimism; a willingness to weigh trust in authority versus healthy skepticism; and shared uncertainty about our future, whether it's Social Security benefits, nuclear warfare, or something else, like climate change.

So how is it manifest in my role as mayor? I tend to be realistically optimistic. I am committed to long-range planning, emergency preparedness, and conservative budgeting. Our community's collective experience is reflected in coalition efforts to address poverty; to facilitate aging-in-place; and our efforts to be sustainable, such as by setting greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets. Just as our predecessors left this place to us, so too shall we leave it for future generations. We are connected.

I grew up in California, where divisions between haves and have-nots could be pretty stark, unless you were a kid in a melting-pot, in which case hierarchies of power were more apt to be determined by birthdate, bullies, or the diameter of your bike wheel than by anything so superficial as skin color or the condition of one's clothes. We played kickball in the streets until it was too dark to see, and regularly explored marshes, woods, ponds, and grasslands, looking for snakes, lizards, crawdads, and adventure.

Through those experiences, I learned about cultural and racial diversity; inclusivity versus segregation; the problem of bullying; public safety; and programs and infrastructure to support active lifestyles.

Locally, we see those influences in outreach to schools through the school reader program, the school resource officer, opportunities for youth engagement in volunteerism and the arts, the Active Living Task Force, Bike for Life activities, Safe Routes to School, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Human Rights Breakfast and awards presentation. Increasingly, Moscow is known for its educated workforce, stimulating environment, and vibrant identity. Our community can be proud of being inclusive, relatively diverse, and vigilant of threats to our social fiber, and I try to be a voice for those values.

I was too young to understand Viet Nam, except that it was the first time war appeared in people's living rooms, delivered by Walter Cronkite on the TV news. In the '60s, popular media suggested that women's liberation had something to do with burning bras. Once, en route to Disneyland, we got lost in the midst of the Watts Riots. I remember roadblocks, armed men in helmets, and fires in the streets. The next day—in keeping with the surreal aspects of that experience—we found ourselves happily ensconced in the Magic Kingdom.

Through those experiences, I began to understand generational gaps; expectations of gender equity; the reality of racism; hazards of violence in the streets; the power of peaceful protest; and risks of irrationality and ignorance.

Locally, we see those aspects brought to the fore by the University of Idaho Women's Center; CommUNITY Walk; Human Rights Commission and Task Force; and through formative efforts for a Northwest Coalition for Human Rights. Our community values peace over violence—Witness the Friday night Peace Vigils in Friendship Square and the loud and insistent, but mostly orderly, megaload protests

downtown. (Kudos to Moscow's Police, as well as the protesters for upholding our hard-earned, carefully balanced Constitutional rights.)

I attended junior high with Steve Jobs—before Apple—and we somehow survived a social climate in which a public school sanctioned “Slave Day-Pants Day,” when girls were allowed to wear pants one day of the year, and boys paid a quarter for us to carry their books from class to class. (I have no recollection of carrying Steve Jobs' books, though I now carry his iPad.)

The take-home messages are to imagine success and overcome obstacles.

I am surprised when I go to grade schools as a reader, and little girls say things like, “I thought only boys could be mayors” or “See! I told those boys that our mayor was a girl!” Needless to say, I encourage children of both genders to pursue their interests, passions, and dreams.

When I was a child, my journey took my mom, brother and me to Boise on the day Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon. It was different than we expected...Boise that is...from the stories our dad told us about growing up in Sandpoint. In 1969, sections of downtown Boise were boarded-up, sprawl was taking hold, and the riverfront was a place where people drained their crankcases. (That's certainly not the case now!) We lived in a motel for two months, because affordable housing was in short supply. I was a good student and respectful of authority. When I started college and set out on my own, I lived in an 8-foot wide trailer, next to a row of board shacks, behind a boisterous bar in Garden City. My neighbors, who didn't have much, decided they had enough to share with me, and I felt valued. My landlord brought me a 50-pound sack of potatoes from his farm, to help me get through the winter.

I learned that the pace, magnitude, and relative value of change is variable, and can be influenced for good or ill. I learned that monetary worth is distinct from personal character, one's work ethic, and one's capacity for compassion, and I realized that education is a path to the future.

Those experiences influence my advocacy for community giving and volunteerism, affordable housing, and compact development. We hold meetings to enhance awareness of poverty, and showcase the arts, cultural tourism, recreation, health and wellness, and volunteerism as integral parts of Moscow's identity. The City's bi-annual citizen surveys track the adequacy of services and community resources.

When I was 22, I began my nursing career on a neuro-surgical unit, where meaningful lessons about life and death, fear and pain, anger and resolve, arrived every day. I married an archaeologist, and surveyed the west—much of it on foot—from Boise to Casper. We worked on digs, lived in tents, skinny-dipped with crewmates, contracted dysentery from the river, and enhanced our appreciation for people who lived before us—parts of a natural system, intimately connected to the earth.

I learned that the reasons behind people's actions and emotional expression aren't always obvious; that walking in someone else's shoes helps you understand them; and that the fundamentals of life are pretty universal: Clean water, air, food, and companionship.

I try to remember those things when someone comes to a public hearing speechless, tearful, red-in-the-face angry or shouting. Are they afraid of losing something important to them? -Outside of their familiar surroundings and support system? -Confused by political jargon and the complexity of the governmental process? -Or seemingly without options? In each case, it is crucial that we remember to take care of the natural systems that take care of us.

Moscow became my home in 1980...begrudgingly at first. In January, it was cold and gray and bare. The people, culture, and vibrancy of the university atmosphere warmed me and brightened my outlook. I remember folk-dancing in what is now City Hall, the travails of becoming a first-time homeowner, by then in the process of a divorce, spending everything I earned to make ends meet, and not having any health insurance, even as a nurse.

I learned that first impressions can be deceiving; that Moscow is made up of integrated parts, held together by something mysterious; that hard-working people can be one crisis away from poverty; and that health insurance matters.

In Moscow, we nurture cultural assets, and do our best to help each other. Local healthcare resources include a variety of healthcare providers, the WWAMI medical education program, regional clinics that provide low- or no-cost care, the Jeff and Becky Martin Community Wellness Center, and Gritman Medical Center, which wrote-off \$1.2M in indigent care last year.

As I became settled in Moscow, I took up running, and married my dog's ophthalmologist, a runner who fed my competitive nature when he encouraged me to race. I liked winning. When my mom got sick, we couldn't find medical- or housing resources to meet her needs or our expectations, so I left my job to take care of her in her home in Boise. I used most of the nursing skills I had, learned a lot about home healthcare, and could only imagine the challenges and frustration encountered by people without such a background.

I learned that common interests link us together; that life skills are transferrable (say, from running foot races to running campaigns); and that jobs, aging parents, and healthcare resources affect workers' choices and the larger economy.

Local resources that offer a foothold include Gritman Adult Day Health, the Area Agency on Aging, My Own Home, the Human Needs Council, Senior Programs and senior meals.

After caring for my mom, I returned home to my husband and our fledgling small business, and decided—at age 45—to enroll in a class that would alter my path and change my life. Steve Drown taught “Issues for the Emerging Landscape.” I felt simultaneously comfortable and invigorated by the experience, and went on to earn my Master's in Environmental Science in 2002. I accepted a part-time job as Administrative Assistant for UI's Humanities Fellows rolling-seminar series, “Sense of Place in the Pacific Northwest: Time, Memory, and Imagination.” The experience was transformative. The program was self-limited, but the relationships that it fostered—including with Rodney—persist to this day.

My take-home messages were to keep learning, stay curious, and find connections.

Today's presentation is part of that network. The University and local government regularly collaborate on mutually-beneficial services like police and fire protection, streets maintenance, co-marketing events, supporting one another's grant proposals, recognition ceremonies, arts and tourism, sustainable infrastructure, community volunteerism, and more. Within government, I strive to make the structure more wheel-like by linking various departments and volunteer commissions through their common objectives. University classes regularly present planning- and design-build concepts, offer volunteer service, and afford other real-life applications for the community at-large.

So, how did I arrive at this place? In 2003, acquaintances anxious for political change sought candidates they hoped could bring it. I agreed to run for the two-year seat on City Council. John Dickinson, former Chair of Computer Science at the University of Idaho—another political newby—had decided to run for one of the four-year seats. His graduate student Sami Omar Al-Hussayen would eventually be exonerated, 17 long months after being accused of terrorism. Observing the actions and influence of government through that ordeal was the impetus for John's campaign. His wide-ranging enthusiasm was contagious, and contributed a variety of spokes to our wheel. John once taught a course about time. Students studied calendars and clocks and talked about what it means to spend or waste time. John noted that, "the very nature of time is asymmetric. We know the past but cannot change it; we are ignorant of the future but we can affect it, sometimes with the slightest action or inaction." Shortly after being elected Council President, John died helping someone at a traffic accident. His influence was, and remains, profound.

I was reminded that comfort zones are over-rated; that principles count; and that failure to act is to have made a choice.

The message was powerful: Take time to do things well. Expend the effort to truly listen to the public and an array of ideas before rendering decisions affecting them. Have fun. Be serious when you must, but keep your ego in check. We are finding commonality and—to borrow a term from UI instructor Ron Walters—"transdisciplinary" connectedness to address big challenges together.

Those connections are spokes in the wheel of my journey. They are what I bring to my service in elected office. Mine is the example that I know best, but when I speak about how these spokes connect rim to hub in the context of public service, please think about the stereotypes of politicians, whose reputations and motives seem automatically morphed overnight, the day following the election. Irish playwright Sean O'Casey wrote: "I don't know why, but (politics) seem to have a tendency to separate us, to keep us from one another, while nature is always and ever making efforts to bring us together." Try thinking about political figures as fellow travelers on this journey. Consider the ways their spokes—families, friends, jobs, and co-workers—are connected to them, and connect them to us. Think about what skills and interests you have that might be applied to metaphorical wheel-building. Consider running for office or volunteering in the community. This place in my journey is the most interesting and fulfilling I have known.

We each contribute to the composition of the wheel and this journey. By virtue of my elected office, some of the things I carry with me are more obvious than others, but sort of like when TSA inspectors reveal the intimate contents of your luggage for all in the airport to see—Trickster would find that funny—political figures are targeted for similar revelations, simply because we have been lumped into a homogenous category of reviled, self-serving boneheads. Allowing that some among us may be, please consider those who are not. We are part of the same wheel, each with different spokes.

Thank you.