

Feb 20, 2016 MFRC Speech : HCOL Loreena McKennitt (D16 w intro & French)

Major General Wheeler, Col Cook , honoured guests.

Thank you Col Cook for those very kind words. ...

and I can't tell you how delighted I am to be back in Manitoba.. a place I always consider as home...

I'd also like to extend my congratulations to committee of the MFRC for once again organising this wonderful event. As usual, you've done a fantastic job.

Merci de m'avoir invite'. Je vous remercie de l'occasion de

parler ce soir. Je vais parler d'un sujet proche de mon coeur.

It is a great privilege to be invited to speak to you this evening, for as a citizen, I feel I am no more deserving of this platform than any of you.

And , I hope there will be nothing in my words which will put you off your food, but rather,..... leave you with a little more food for thought! At the end of the evening, however ...I will be happy to sing for my supper.

It has been nearly 9 years since I first joined the Air Force community, which of course is more than a community. It is a family rich with service to Canadians and the world at large and steeped in its own traditions and history. It's been wonderful to learn and to continue to learn about the Air Force family.

Not only have I had a chance to meet & speak with various serving members, but also with many of those member's partners, spouses and children.

I have met them while in the thick of operations or at a social functions, or at a terminal happily waiting for their loved ones to return home or at Trenton for solemn repatriation ceremonies. I have been humbled and amazed at what they are able to do and be, given that there are unique and difficult challenges in being a family in the Canadian Forces. I have heard of the challenges of finding a doctor, child care, a school, a new house and financing , drivers license or spousal employment....every time they move.

In the Canadian Forces Ombudsman's 2013 report, entitled “ *On the Homefront*” <http://www.ombudsman.forces.gc.ca/en/ombudsman-reports-stats-investigations-military-families/military-families.page>

Pierre Daigle speaks to 3 dimensions which make military family life that much more challenging than regular civilian life.

He identifies: risk, mobility, and separation. I know each military family can appreciate the meaning of those words.

I felt this concept so important that I wanted to quote him directly on this,

*“In isolation, none of these three characteristics is unique to CF members and their families. When combined, the distinctiveness of the military career becomes more obvious. Few occupations or professions expose the overwhelming majority of its people to recurring geographic relocation, relentless separation and elevated levels of risk as a matter of course throughout much of their careers.” End quote.*

Yes, military families have unique challenges; they also must face the trials that all families meet in today’s world. To fully appreciate this, let us step back to look at some of the changes that have shaken society and family life in general. I want to share some thoughts with you this evening on that ‘big picture.’

I would imagine that many of us would say that if our families are happy and thriving, then we are relatively happy and can focus on our work...or we might attest on our dying bed, that it wasn’t our car, our house, our holidays or even our “*smart*” phones which meant the most to us. Like myself, many are likely

to say that their family, their friends and collegial relationships stand as the most valued in their life's course.

And yet, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are severely challenged to define exactly what friendship and family mean.

I am reminded and inspired by a wonderful lecture by British anthropologist, Robin Dunbar called "*Can the internet buy you friends?*"

<http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxObserver-Robin-Dunbar-Can-t>

When speaking to a group of youth, Professor Dunbar, challenges their concept of friends as defined by Facebook. A large part of his professional research has focused on what determines the desirable group size of *mammals, including us!!* He would discover that the physiological reason was the ratio between the neo-cortex -the site of our highest brain functions- and the what 'group size' makes for best social relationships.

For dogs, the ideal pack size was around 50 ...and for elephants preferred herds were larger still. For people, he discovered an ideal group size was about 150. The size of an English or a Tuscan village. (Or as I was recently reminded, the size of a battalion, Squadron or ship's company!!) This principal is now widely accepted as the "*Dunbar number*" and Malcom Gladwell captures this

fascinating fact about ideal human group size in his best seller *The Tipping Point*.

When I read this, my mind went immediately back to my formative years, growing-up years in Morden, a suburb of Winnipeg, a mere 80 miles up the road from here.

Along with my parents and both sets of grandparents, there were aunts and uncles and close family friends. We shared meals together along with traditional Sunday dinners ; we met at various social gatherings, at variety nights, at dances or skating . As kids, we had paper routes and the run of the town, and of course, we were told not to come home until the street lights had come on. The concept of a 'play date' would have been as foreign as Mars.

The milk man lived with his family just down the street and many a morning my childhood slumber would be jostled by the tinkle of the milk bottles on the step as the streets and town life were slowly awakening. We would walk to school and back each day and our parents knew our teachers. Our teachers knew our parents , and home and school sang from the same song sheet as it pertained to discipline , attendance, and the curriculum. The teachers lived in the community, and we'd see them at the grocery store or at church.

As Robin Dunbar would explain, this village for the human species would feel comfortable, secure and accountable amongst people the inhabitants knew. Everyone had a vested interest in knowing about and helping out, wherever they could. With fewer financial and technological resources, there was a strong social cohesion with the neighbours and the village. The primal urge to 'look after their own' would take over. The proverbial adage "*It takes a village to raise a child*" was more or less alive, well and intact"

But where are such communities today? Have we lost them? Is it possible to create them again?

Award-winning Canadian writer, Charles Montgomery goes on to look at these issues in his fascinating book called *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design.*) In that book he describes extensive research into the psychological impact on us created by architecture and urban design. And he points out that, at various stages along the way and more recently in the 70 & 80's, town and city design in North America would take a turn away from the village.

The dominance of the car became prevalent, as we as a species started to experiment with many different ways and modalities of living. The vast development and suburb model would take hold. By the 1980's, gone were the

corner stores, the local post office, the sidewalks which would lead us to and from work, school, church and the various places which facilitated our connectedness. Car culture would now dominate. And day-to-day human contact was significantly reduced, as life became, supposedly, 'easier and convenient.

And yet it wasn't just architecture or urban design which may have taken a left turn in the 1980's. According to clinical psychiatrist Dr Gordon Neufeld and Dr Gabor Mate, in their ground breaking book *Hang onto your Kids* there was also a fundamental change in the way that parents related to their children.

Neufeld and Mate argue that in the context of the clinical terms of attachment and bonding which children have *always* had with their parents, grandparents and extended family, this attachment started to become unmoored around the end of the second world war, coinciding with the advent of television. This early introduction of mass media, which, along with *Leave it to Beaver*, would bring sophisticated marketing for all manner of things including addictive substances such as cigarettes and sugar laced foods.

Now it was not just the family and the village which had the children's attention. Gone were the days when children tasted the raw edge of boredom and had to use their own imaginations and creative energies to entertain

themselves. Parents and families, not equipped with media analysis training, got a sharp taste of the media invasion and all that has come with that and which has only grown to this day.

Professor Henry Giroux of McMaster University argues that the very nature of youth, so often spoken of as '*our future*' is being changed as they are being 'carpet-bombed with consumer culture.'

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/disposable-youth-1.3036140>

So, in this age of disruptive technologies which has equipped us with terms such as '*digital dementia*', and '*nature deficit disorder*' I hear so many parents, & families lament that they don't know what has hit them or their children. Their adolescent children have not acquired vital person – to person communications skills.... For girls it has come primarily through the instant and perpetual "connectedness" provided by their 24/7 smartphones

( see CNN documentary "*Being Thirteen* )

[https://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjzt\\_zjj4jLAhUD2R4KHcVyD2wQFggcMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2Fspecials%2Fus%2Fbeing13&usg=AFQjCNECMQyofaYiTB-QfNRRUheRpE885g](https://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjzt_zjj4jLAhUD2R4KHcVyD2wQFggcMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cnn.com%2Fspecials%2Fus%2Fbeing13&usg=AFQjCNECMQyofaYiTB-QfNRRUheRpE885g) )

... for boys, its particularly the X-boxes and other gaming devices which offer hours of so-called “playtime” at a screen filled with heavy violent images.

These parents are puzzled on how to sort the good from the bad ....or on how to understand cause and effect, when it comes to such issues as self esteem, mental health, suicide and bullying.

I hear experts across a broad spectrum of professions who are speaking out with great concern, be they clinical psychiatrists, paediatricians, optometrists or medical doctors. They speak of afflictions concerning vision, sleep, Type 2 diabetes, attention deficit disorder and even endocrine system problems which can determine so much of our human development.

As Dr Arik Sigman speaks to in his 2013 report to the European Union,

*“this is not a cultural conversation about how children spend their leisure time” but rather , “...screen time has become a medical issue.”*

<http://www.ecswe.com/downloads/publications/QOC-V3/Chapter-4.pdf>

And yet, many of these experts attest, that they are not being heard or given standing in the community... and that the most significant and alarming fact,

which is being lost in the ether,... is that many of these devices are highly addictive.

Some argue that school boards and ministries of education have become main proponents of this high tech approach to education and hence enablers in the disruption of family life.

- Teachers lament that they are forced to learn and incorporate the various technologies into the classroom, and into the curriculum, often without proper instruction themselves and only, to sometimes, abandon them;
- or that they can't compete with the action figures the children are consuming off-hours;
- Or that there is not a companion curriculum to educate and warn students and families about the perils of the internet which include pornography, fraud, cyber-hacking and bullying.

Small neighbourhood schools, which were once part of village life, have closed in the name of efficiencies, only for children to be bussed long distances, armed with their Smartphones as ways of now staying “*connected*” with the parents who used to walk them to school.

School boards themselves have become mammoth operations which many parents find impenetrable and who, one worries, may be listening to Microsoft

and Apple, instead of focusing on the growing body of research coming out in this big digital experiment.

It was informative that the OECD's most recent report on technologies in schools state that more technology does not necessarily mean better learning.

<http://www.oecd.org/education/students-computers-and-learning-9789264239555-en.htm> that *“even countries which have invested heavily in information communication technologies, (ICT) have seen no noticeable improvement in their performances in PISA results for Math, Science and reading.”*

Indeed, [an alternative to this phenomena](#) can be witnessed in various Waldorf/Steiner schools around the world, who have made the conscious decision to delay the introduction of *any* connection technologies until grade 8 and who have gone on to produce graduates who are Nobel Laureates,

<http://www.steinerwaldorf.org/waldorf-graduate-gets-a-nobel-prize/>

a CEO of American Express and a Prime Minister of Norway and , ironically, to work in many IT companies.

Just think about what other things could be done with an average school board's IT budget!!!

So, when one pulls back and looks at this from the anthropological stand point as Drs Neufeld and Mate are doing, they argue, that *for the first time in human history* , and *since the advent of mass media and connection technologies*, they are witnessing the complete migration of children's attachment, formerly with their parents , now move to their children's peers. If, that is indeed the case, we now have *children raising children*.

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So where do these technologies come from and who is behind the Silicon Valley's Kool-aid? In Ira Basin's radio documentary *The Valley of the Kings* <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/the-niqab-and-citizenship-the-bystander-effect-train-love-in-the-valley-of-the-kings-1.2963290/in-the-valley-of-the-kings-an-ira-basen-documentary-1.2963565> he pulls back the curtains on Silicon Valleys' latest gift to the world, the '*sharing economy*', and the disarming language of '*friend, like, connection, community, and do your own thing..making the world a better place.*' Some would say they are in the business of co-opting the language of the village but delivering nothing but loneliness and alienation.

But he asserts that when you look past these feel-good words, you get a glimpse of what is really in store- a future where tech wizards, not governments

make the rules. I am reminded of this when I see the photo ops as I did of the most recent World Economic Summit in Davos , Switzerland where, in amongst the democratically-elected members of our western nations, are the tech titans from Silicon Valley such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. We are definitely living in a different permutation of ‘democracy’ now.

( also hear: CBC’s Sunday Edition *What’s Not to Like about Facebook?*)

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/surviving-a-tough-interview-revolutionary-presidential-candidates-facebook-s-rise-to-global-domination-1.3443850/facebook-what-s-not-to-like-an-ira-basen-documentary-1.3445888>

This is the industry which brags about their “*disruptive innovations*” -- or as companies like Uber like to put it, their “*principled confrontation of the law*” and who invite their relatively few female employees who envision having families one day, to defer that life goal into their forties, as the company will, as part of its benefit package, pay for the freezing of their eggs.

Some days, it feels like we are in some bad science fiction movie, crossed with Orwell’s *1984* and Margaret Atwood’s novel, a *Handmaid’s Tale*. One also wonders if we are like the frog in the boiling water...we won’t know what has happened to us until it is too late.

Indeed, the great scientist, Stephen Hawking, has urged a slowdown in this technological “star wars” until we can take stock and plot out together, where we want to go from here.... that he, along with Tesla founder Elon Musk, warn that artificial intelligence “*is the human species biggest existential risk.*” (Note to reader: Centre for the Study of Existential Risk <http://cser.org/>)

We observe from research such as that outlined in Nicholas Carr’s book *The Shallows: (What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains)*, that the human brain, the very organ of our species, which is needed to navigate through all the challenges of our time, is not only under attack, but is already in the process of changing its very physiology.

Now don’t get me wrong, I believe as many others do, that there has been great merit in a lot of our recent technological advances. I use many of them. I drive a car, I use a computer and let me show you the phone I actually call people on to make dates to get together!!

And yet, connection technologies alone have pushed further and faster than any laws and governments around the world have been able to keep up with, whether it has to do with privacy, fraud, pornography, copyright or cyber-security. And in the absence of public discourse and informed consent, they

have pushed and continue to push our society and especially our families to the brink.

When one looks at the range of challenges youth and their families must experience now, be it bullying or vulnerability to radicalisation, one quickly realises there is a catastrophe looming in contemporary family life. Unfettered technology has changed our village,.... our way of life,.... our childhood.

As I watch our world change, and I look at the family, especially the military family, with all of its built-in stresses, I wonder how we will cope with this? And perhaps the answer is ‘together’, ‘by helping each other’, ‘by helping to create a supportive and sustaining village of shared interest and worthwhile goals.’”

### THE MILITARY FAMILY

If we can all agree that the human species thrives in a kind of “village-like setting” how does one bring that to military family life?

Most childhood experts & paediatricians will agree that children will thrive and develop their capacities and capabilities, including that for resilience, when they have experienced:

- Unconditional love
- A place which provides a sense of security and safety

- Along with continuity, routine, consistency, and predictability which comes with the rhythm and structures of a well balanced daily life.

And so, when my mind goes back to those 3 unique challenges that the ombudsman has identified as being at the core to military family life..*risk* , *mobility and separation*, and add them to what is already going on in civilian life, we may have a deeply concerning situation.

This is not to say that most military families aren't capable, stoic or resilient and, for the most part, successful. But one does recognise, their family life is unique.

In a 2014 document called '*In Search of the Social Covenant*' authored by Ret'd Brig Gen Joe Sharpe, he speaks to a broader concept of veterans and their families. (*Some of you in the audience may recall his tenure here as Wing Commander of 17 Wing in the late '90s during the Manitoba Floods.*) He points out that they, the veterans,- are not only individuals who have served in wars and conflicts of the *past*, but also those who serve *still*. In other words, *one soldier, one veteran*.

This document speaks primarily in relation to the subject of injury and the obligation Canadians have to support those injured individuals and their families.

I think so significant is the contribution of those who serve, as well as the sacrifice, that I personally would welcome the concept of a social covenant to be extended to *all* who serve... and their families,.. regardless of whether or not there are injuries. I would welcome a covenant that could say:

That once you join the Air Force family, you are joining your family to a much larger family and once you are in, you're in for good.

That Canadian citizens, through this covenant will show their gratitude and support, every way they can. Sometimes through encouraging their elected representatives to develop government support mechanisms. ....Sometimes through the organisations in which citizens work and belong;.... and others, through operating as a local support team when a family moves newly to the neighbourhood. Indeed, this is one of the areas that the community of RCAF HCols is working hard toward strengthening.

For me, as citizen, I feel the promotion of a social covenant amongst individuals and organisations in support of the members of our military family is a fundamental and foundational step, toward improving the average citizen's

sense of military literacy, and giving them an opportunity to say “Thank you for what you do.”

And in that spirit of leadership, of which the RCAF has such a rich heritage, perhaps this is the moment that military life can be re-envisioned, so that we can bring more of the village back to the family, and even possibly be a beacon for other communities to be inspired by.

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The good news is that there are an ever growing number of organisations and initiatives set up and running to support military families – Not the least amongst this group of which are the MFRCs such as this one in Winnipeg. They are the ones who stand almost in a category of their own. And I commend the incredible work they do by the paid and unpaid supporters who run these organisations.

Recently, while attending a leadership roundtable hosted by the Vanier Institute, I would learn of nearly 65 *more* organisations and initiatives. And we were told this was not all there was.

...that one of the biggest challenges was to ensure that those on the home front were aware and have access to this network. And I know of strong efforts being made to address this part of the information chain.

I was and am deeply moved by the number of people in this community and across the country, who are wanting to help. I see this in the eyes of the growing number of people attending Remembrance Day Services. They have **NOT** forgotten.

I have long felt that democracy does not thrive as a spectator sport and that we all must be soldiers of democracy. I believe that we are living at a time when we can and must take “lessons learned” from the past and then move forward with conviction and reclaim that part of our lives most valuable to us. Our families, our homes and our village.

The Military Family Resource Centre is a community, a ‘village’ for so many in our Military Family. And we can’t thank them enough.

You, here tonight, are part of that village too, and I can’t thank *you* enough.

Pendant ma vie j’ai reçu nombreux honneurs.

Mon plus grand honneur – c’est de faire partie de votre famille – la famille militaire. Je vous remercie pour le privilege de vous servir.”

Of all the honours I have received in my career and my life, none can compare with the honour of being part of this extraordinary RCAF family.

In closing, to those who have served or are serving still, I thank you. To all of those families who stand with and around them, I thank you.

On behalf of all of those who experience the benefit of your service and sacrifice. I thank you. And finally, I thank you for the privilege of serving you.

**END**