

# WHAT WE HEARD SUMMARY

JULY 2023

## 2023 AGM Panel Discussion

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### **Radically Hopeful Futures**

*Cultivating Imaginations for Civic Engagement  
Panel Discussion and Community Conversation*





# A Grounding

**Let's face it: the future is a bit of a mystery, isn't it?**

With things like climate change, social disparity, and everything else happening in the world, it's easy for our hopes to get caught up in a haze of uncertainty. But what if we told you that you have the power to decide how you want to use the future. Wouldn't that be awesome?

To break free from our collective "poverty of the imagination," in June 2023 as part of our Annual General Meeting, Volunteer Alberta (VA) hosted "Radically Hopeful Futures: Cultivating Imaginations for Civic Engagement," a panel discussion featuring three fantastic speakers who ignited attendees imaginations, and facilitated discussions on how we can tap into our innate ability to imagine alternative futures.

During the conversation, we discussed the importance of cultivating imagination in volunteerism and civic engagement and explored hopeful alternatives to dystopian thinking. Attendees were encouraged to dream about the future beyond traditional linear thinking, embrace imaginative exploration with others, and learn how to nurture hope beyond existing beliefs.

Throughout 2023, VA is engaged on a Strategic Dreaming journey, to help us find our compass for the next three years. This panel discussion and the group conversation that emerged from it will be a key input for this work ahead. This What We Heard report is a documentation of the insights that were shared by panelists and session attendees, and plants seeds for visions of the future of civic engagement that are sustainable, inclusive, and hopeful.

## WHO WAS IN THE ROOM

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### Panelists

Jacquelyn Cardinal (she/her)

Cassie Robinson (any pronouns)

Annand Ollivierre (he/him)

### Moderator

Darryl De Dios  
(he/him)

To learn more about the panelists, you can read their bios [here](#).

More than 40 people who are part of Volunteer Alberta's larger community attended the session and participated in the conversation.

## WHAT HAPPENED IN THE ROOM

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### What we asked the panelists

How might you define imagination, and why should we be talking about it in relation to civic engagement?

In your opinion, what might be holding us back from engaging in imagination? What do we need to (un)learn?

In the realm of imagination, what might it mean to be good organizational ancestors? What might it look like for us to set the groundwork for realizing our imaginations for the future in the here and now?

### What the panelists asked the audience in breakout rooms

When it comes to volunteerism and civic engagement, what do you imagine?

Where does imagination show up in your professional lives?

## WHAT WE HEARD FROM THE PANELISTS

### Question 1 : How might you define imagination, and why should we be talking about it in relation to civic engagement?

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Today, many of our norms, social systems, and ways of knowing can harm and marginalize people for identities and ways of being considered as 'other'.

**Imagination, especially in the context of civic engagement, is about wanting and creating a future where everyone matters.**

For all the panelists, there is a deep and shared understanding that imagination means tending to our relationship with the future. Imagination involves managing tensions between our desire to have foresight into what's ahead with curiosity and openness about what's possible.

## WHAT WE HEARD FROM THE PANELISTS

### **Question 2 : In the realm of imagination, what might it mean to be good organizational ancestors? What might it look like for us to set the groundwork for realizing our imaginations for the future in the here and now?**

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Each panelist encouraged the idea that we should be collectively aware of how our actions today will affect future generations. To become good organizational ancestors in our work, we must recognize how our actions in the here and now shape what we imagine for the future.

#### **What the panelists said**

- 🌸 Annand: Like our predecessors who created spaces and structures that benefit us, we should similarly act as good hosts to those who come after us and think about what we can do to ensure that they also benefit from the communities and relationships they inherit.
- 🌸 Jacquelyn: Indigenous teachings have always held the importance of considering how present-day actions impact seven generations, and it is crucial to start creating structures now for beautiful futures that our descendants can readily step into.
- 🌸 Cassie: Being mindful of how our actions affect the future allows us to continuously practice and bring to life what we're imagining or hoping for. After all, "what we pay attention to grows" (Adrienne Marie Brown).

#### **What the panelists recommended**

- 🌸 Think about the work ahead and act now to create the structures needed to nourish and cultivate the future that you imagine. Invest in the time and resources needed to "do" collective imagination work. Commit to thinking about the future and work on what you hope to accomplish.
- 🌸 Think deeply and carefully about what you want in the future and notice how those things are already happening in the present. Archive what you have done and what you continue to do and take stock of the knowledge and learnings that you acquire.
- 🌸 Do some "composting work". Ask: what is relevant to your current and ongoing work? What is relevant to your purpose and the major issues happening today? Think about what you need to make space for and what you might need to divest in or let go. What might you need to change and/or "compost" to let your imagination grow?

# WHAT WE HEARD FROM THE PANELISTS

## Question 3 : In your opinion, what might be holding us back from engaging in imagination? What do we need to (un)learn?

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### What the panelists said

- ✿ Cassie: In the UK context, there is a prevalent sense of fatalism that there is no way beyond many of the challenges and social problems we face today. Many people find themselves in survival mode or are in total denial of what is happening in the world. These feelings and varied realities can block people from imagining and thinking about different possibilities.
- ✿ Jacquelyn: Anxieties and realities that come with scarcity will always limit us to think only about incremental improvements. Feelings that there are not enough to go around (e.g., resources, time, etc.) can lead us to fear failure, and stick to what feels safe and familiar.
- ✿ Annand: Imagination is often mistakenly collapsed with optimism and naivety, but it goes far deeper. Imagination asks us to be curious, and to engage with the constraints that we face and ask what else is possible.

### What the panelists recommended

- ✿ Engage in collective imagination with others and perceive a future beyond what you see and know. In this way, it becomes possible to more easily perceive the need for imagining alternative futures that welcome identity, strength, and pride.
- ✿ Allow yourself to be curious about different ideas, and to expand your understanding of what is realistic. Do you carry a mindset that allows or pushes you to actively learn from others? Are you prepared to embrace positive outcomes or best-case scenarios, or are you simply worrying and preparing for the worst?

# WHAT WE HEARD DURING THE BREAKOUT ROOMS

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## Question 1: Where does imagination show up in your professional lives?

- Overall, imagination in the social impact/non-profit/voluntary sector relates to the broader question of how we can continue to improve our service to communities and the ways that we build and cultivate relationships.
- In one breakout room, the participants noted that imagination shows up in three major ways: when solving problems, when questioning the status quo, and when the urgency for change or action arises.
- Some participants admitted that providing space for imagination can be challenging and is only possible when time is specifically given for it, which can be rare.
- Returning to the metaphor of composting, some participants brought up the issue of “rotting vegetation” or the persistence of the old ways holding people back from imagining alternative futures. Many people in this work must go with what has been created for them, and not everyone in this space is willing to engage in imagination work.

## Question 2: When it comes to volunteerism and civic engagement, what do you imagine?

- Several participants noted the importance of making way for new and diverse perspectives in the sector and imagining what it would look like to give those perspectives spaces to be genuinely recognized.
- Some suggested re-evaluating the trajectory and growth of volunteerism and community mobilization in the past several years, and to re-imagine how we do things to adapt to any changes.



# So What

Imagination work is critical to how we navigate the future, especially in the face of uncertainties and unpredictable social disruptions. Cultivating our imagination is about sustaining hope that a future centered on wellness and wellbeing is possible. In the words of one of our discussion participants, “imagination is healing”.

# Now What

This conversation provided Volunteer Alberta with important insights. During the summer of 2023, Volunteer Alberta hosted community conversations to help us learn what beautiful futures exist in the imaginations of the people, organizations, and communities we serve. These conversations will then serve as stars for VA to navigate by, in support our organization’s Strategic Dreaming. In the autumn of 2023, VA’s staff and board will use these insights to help set our organization’s North Star and compass for 2024 - 2026. We will be asking ourselves many of the questions that are held here, especially in understanding what works, what might need to change, and how we can do our part in imagining and helping realize spaces that center care and wellbeing in the realm of civic engagement and volunteerism. We’ll continue to share about our journey on our website in the months ahead.

Thanks for  
joining us  
for this  
conversation

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