

Foreword

I have known Nico now for almost fifteen years. Starting out as colleagues, we have also become friends. In some ways, he has also been a mentor, although he himself would probably shrug off such a notion immediately. If anybody exemplifies kindness, I would say it is he. Nico has written more than hundred books and articles. The theme running through all of these is one of compassion and empathy for people, and especially for children, for the way they are and how they behave. This latest book, in many ways, is the culmination of all the previous work. A kind of synthesis of his hopes and ideas, for children and for humankind in general. Paying it forward, or altruism, may be deeply rooted in Darwinist evolution, a trait that paid some genetic dividend making it part of our makeup. However, that is not what Nico and Rona are interested in. In this book, they are exploring the occurrence and prevalence of this trait, in our everyday lives and seek to have us to acknowledge, embrace and celebrate it.

This is optimism not for the sake of some lofty ideal, but because it is real. Moreover, because it is really important. Doing good without maybe ever experiencing its effects is good for our health, as individuals and as societies. It is good for today's generation and for tomorrow's. It is easy and it is common; these are the notions that Rona and Nico aim to highlight in this marvellous, almost jubilant book.

Without the writers' knowing or even in the slightest way wanting this; that also makes this book a testimony to their lives: they have been paying it forward since forever. I surely hope Nico and Rona are not about to stop yet.

'Pay it forward' is also the underlying and driving force that propels ICDI forward as we seek, with our partners, wherever they are, to create environments for children and young people that are less toxic and allow them to create a world that is kind to them and to those who come after them. It is rewarding to see how the authors' and our views and feelings overlap, complement, and reinforce each other.

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Introduction

When I was asked to write an introduction to this book on *Paying it Forward*, I honestly was not sure there was much more to say on the issue. It quickly became evident to me that I was wrong. This book reflects on connectedness between people, between generations, and with the earth, we live on. People have never been so connected physically and virtually – so why do so many feel disconnected and alone? Pulling together old, new, and evolving philosophies, the book explores timeless truths in the context of a rapidly changing world. I found myself with a deepening appreciation for the concept of *Paying it Forward* and its real-world applications.

I am the Executive Director of a Child Welfare organization. Child Welfare has a long history of paying it forward in ways that are both intentional and unintentional, both good and evil. Very often, we provide life-changing support to families in times of utmost need. We also focus far too often on imminent risk to the detriment of the child, the family, and the community. This book suggests that professionally and personally we need to always be looking forward [and backwards!] not an hour or a day, not even weeks or months – but generations.

The parents we encounter in child welfare, often with limited coping skills, are presented with the biggest of all coping challenges – the possible removal of their child. When this tragic event occurs, it is most often not to a relative or friend, but removal to a stranger with no connections to the family. This over reliance on removal has devastated many families. Nowhere is this more true than when it comes to black families and indigenous communities.

To take a child out of their family constellation is to peel away not only their connections, but to inhibit their capacity to connect. This pays forward in their future relationships impacting their children and their children's children. Can there be any long-term wellness without deep, meaningful, *permanent* connectivity? Is connection nurtured, measured and *required* in child welfare casework?

I have had the privilege of attending several reconciliation events between the child welfare field in Ontario and indigenous, Métis and Inuit peoples. That path of reconciliation will be a long hard journey and I am honoured to be walking with so many peoples of courage and hope. I have heard many difficult stories during this journey, but one in particular has stayed with me. A courageous woman who looked to be about 30 got up and quietly told the group that she was taken away from her village when she was a young girl and adopted by a mixed-race couple, the husband white and the wife Asian. She was told never to say she was "Indian" and told she could likely pass as their child given her colour. This led to a lifetime of identity loss; never feeling treated the same as the other children in the family. As an adult, when she tried to reconnect with her birth community, she did not feel welcomed. In her words: "I wasn't white enough to be white, Asian enough to be Asian and no longer Indian enough to be Indian. I am nothing."

That sense of disconnection in her voice, the way she held her body, has never left me. An act, likely carried out by a well-intentioned social worker, likely by a good person, payed terribly forward in ways that will take generations to stop reverberating. There it was, the importance of connection between generations, the centrality of connections, laid bare. How many generations' actions were paying forward into that one moment where a courageous woman disclosed her stark personal reality?

Then, something beautiful happened. Someone decided to pay something else forward. One of the indigenous grandmothers in the room went and embraced her. Then another. Here they were, in a room full of child welfare representatives, reconciling with themselves. Recognising their own role in paying forward upon one of their own an echo of the 'gift' visited on them by us. I have never felt such a bundle of clashing emotions. Shame. Grief. Hope. Admiration. The feeling as if we were the last people with any right to see this play out, such a private, intimate moment. Feeling like we were the most in need of seeing it. I believe that moment made me a better advocate, a better leader, perhaps even a better person.

Who knows how many generations our actions, intentional and unintentional, might impact? We live not in a moment, but in a powerful, endless, and most often invisible river of events that are paying forward all around us. Rona and Nico are calling us to open our eyes, buy a paddle, and steer the damn boat.

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