

Faith in the Oil Patch

Donna Kennedy-Glans¹

The Synergies and Symbioses of the Petrochemical Industry on Rural Families

Good afternoon. Let me extend a heart-felt thank you to Bishop Mayan for his timely vision—for his ability to see the potential of bringing together people of faith from rural communities across southern Alberta and northern Montana.

Here is the front page from Monday's Calgary Herald²—it's the photo of a farmer, Don Bester, described in this article as "a land-rights advocate who farms east of Innisfail". Mr. Bester's concern? The plans by the Energy Resources Conservation Board to loosen rules on oil and gas well density leaving landowners with no right of objection to multi-well directional drilling from a single drilling pad. As a farmer, Mr. Bester is understandably worried about how he is going to navigate his large equipment around oil wells on his land.

Like Mr. Bester, many of you here today have a symbiotic relationship with the oil industry. How many of you, or your children, work in the oil patch to subsidize your family farm or ranch? Do any of you have a producing oil or gas well on your land; a pipeline crossing; or an oil company wanting to acquire 2-D or 3-D seismic to better understand the hydrocarbon potential of your property? If you are involved in agriculture, it's inevitable that you are dependent on oil to operate your equipment and machinery. And, unless you have gone organic, it's likely that you use petrochemical products to fertilize your crops and control weeds.

This feeling of being 'wedded' to the oil industry may not always sit comfortably. It may even feel like an arranged marriage where no one really gave you much of a choice. But this state of symbiosis or co-dependency between the agricultural sector and the oil sector is real in Alberta and Montana. And, the ripple effects you feel in the rural communities where you live are likewise real:

- If you or one of your children works in the oil patch, you may feel uncomfortable when farmers and ranchers and others in your community grumble about the accelerating pace and scale of oil and gas activity. Don't they understand that if projects in the patch wind down, you or one of your children may lose the job or contract needed to make your farm or family business viable?
- You may have a pang of disquiet when media campaigns discredit the 'greedy' oil industry and its role in fuelling climate change. You may even squirm a little when American and European consumers boycott Alberta's 'dirty oil'.

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² *Landowners fear plan to ease oil, gas rules*, Calgary Herald, Monday January 24, 2011.

- You may be nervous about the long term effects of fertilizer runoff on local water aquifers—on towns and cities downstream. If you have children or grandchildren, you may wonder at times how decisions you make today will affect their future.

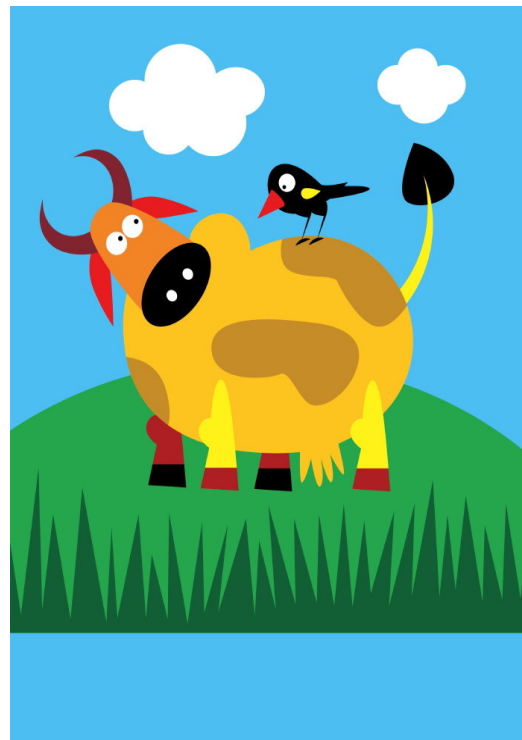
Everyone on this Earth is to some degree dependent on the oil patch. But, your degree of attachment is greater than most. You are standing in that space between the two most powerful economies in Alberta and Montana, oil and agriculture. As a person of faith, how do you see yourself in all of this?

How you visualize yourself in that space is important. Bishop Mayan set the tone of this conference with its title: **The Synergies and Symbioses of the Petrochemical Industry on Rural Families**. There are a lot of ways to envision ‘*symbiosis*’, traditionally defined by biologists as the mutually beneficial relationship involving close physical contact between two organisms that aren’t the same species. I’m sure that you would agree: agriculture and oil aren’t the same economic species.

What comes to mind for me when I try to visualize symbiosis is the relationship between oxpeckers, those birds that eat the parasites off large animals like the African buffalo, and the African buffaloes that can’t physically reach up over their shoulders to get rid of those annoying parasites on their own. No doubt you have seen more domesticated versions of this relationship in pastures here in Alberta and Montana.

At first glance, this seems like a mutually beneficial relationship. Except it isn’t quite that simple: these oxpeckers are also parasites, keeping wounds open and picking at scabs on the backs of these large animals.

Symbiosis sounds like a nice way to be—who wouldn’t want to enter into mutually beneficial relationships—but it’s never that simple. Rarely is symbiosis perfectly symmetrical.



Courtesy Microsoft Word Clipart

As people of faith, it’s important that you ask unsettling questions about your role in this symbiotic relationship between rural economies and the oil patch. How do you see yourself in this *in between* place? I’m sure most of you don’t want to see yourself as that African buffalo or domesticated cow, serenely enjoying rural pastures yet dependent on that hungry tar-coloured bird to pick parasites off your back. So here’s another way to visualize yourself as a Christian in this *in between* space.

Imagine yourself standing upright, with one foot in the agricultural industry and the other foot in the oil patch. So, let’s do that – please stand up for a moment. Make some room between yourself and your neighbor. Put your hands on your hips and spread out your legs, wide. Now, imagine you are *straddling* these two sectors: You have your *left foot* in the agricultural world and your *right foot* in the oil patch. Wiggle your toes a little. It’s helpful even to close your eyes and feel it--left foot is in the rural

community, right foot is in the oil patch. Does one foot feel more grounded than the other? Okay, hold that pose for a moment. Try to feel this sense of straddling.

Now, imagine that a big oil company has just come into your community to announce a large scale project—maybe the construction of a pipeline through your district or the building of a gas processing plant. You are conflicted. Your son would have an opportunity to stay in the community and contribute to the family farm if the project goes ahead. Yet many of your neighbors are really upset. How is your footing now? Remember: left foot is in the agricultural community; right foot is in the oil patch.

And now, imagine that you are with friends at a local bar watching a football game on a widescreen television, and during a commercial break an advertisement by Rethink Alberta³ appears on the screen. This commercial depicts Albertans as greedy beneficiaries of dirty oil and tells would-be visitors to Alberta: “stay away!” Again, check your footing. Now imagine that later that same week, you are having dinner and your 13-year old niece has joined you...and she starts ranting about evil oil companies and how they poison the air and the water. Are you still feeling balanced?

Okay, you can open your eyes again and be seated.

In southern Alberta and in Montana, lots of people ride horses so it’s likely that you will be familiar with the sensation of ‘*straddling*’. At the beginning of this exercise, did you feel comfortable in this pose...like you were standing up in the saddle on a horse that knows you well, your feet resting firmly and balanced in each of the stirrups?

Then we disrupted that equilibrium—with announcements of a large scale oil project in your community, and negative advertising targeting the oil patch. How did you react? Did you find yourself up on tip-toes, even weaving back and forth? Worse yet, did anyone feel like they were trying to ride a barbed wire fence, needing to keep one foot on the ground at all times, and the other one in the air? You had to be in on one side of the fence, or the other.



Images Courtesy Microsoft Word Clipart

Straddling the agricultural sector and the oil patch isn’t always going to be comfortable. Sometimes you will land on the barbed wire fence. But being aware of how each of your feet is connected to the ground, and how you adjust your footing when someone or some event rattles that equilibrium, can make straddling more comfortable.

³ Rethink Alberta campaign: <http://rethinkalberta.com/main.php>

Let me share a few of my own *straddling* experiences with you.

Right now, I probably look like someone from the oil patch; I'm not wearing a pin-striped suit but I look like I would fit in with people working at the head office of an oil company in downtown Calgary or Edmonton. And, that's true; I do feel comfortable in the patch. In 1984, I graduated from law school and immediately started working in the sector; first with TransCanada Pipelines' international subsidiary as a lawyer and negotiator and then with Canadian Occidental Petroleum, now Nexen Inc. I've worked on the ground representing oil companies in projects situated in more than thirty countries—including places like Nigeria, Colombia, Vietnam, Algeria and Yemen. In 1997, I was appointed Nexen's first female vice president.

So, that's my one foot. It's deeply entrenched in the oil patch. *But, what about my other foot?* This may surprise you, but it's in the agricultural sector. I have rural roots. I grew up on our family's tobacco and beef farm in southwestern Ontario, near a town called Tillsonburg. As Stompin' Tom Connors croons, "*Tillsonburg. My back still aches when I hear that word.*" As a young girl, these are the censures I heard on a daily basis...along with every other citizen living in the tobacco belt of southern Ontario:

'This industry is killing us; the tar is clogging up our systems and causing cancer. Greedy companies are deliberately understating the negative impacts. They act like they care but they are just wolves dressed in sheep's clothing.'

'It's a cash cow and nobody has the guts to shut it down! Lobbyists earn millions to keep this industry alive. Governments are addicted to the tax revenues.'

When my parents purchased our first television set in the early 1960's, we were mesmerized by the chain-smoking movie stars dancing across our tiny black and white screen. Remember when images of John Wayne, cigarette in hand, symbolized virility and Joan Crawford lighting a cigarette was the epitome of elegance? What guy didn't want to be the Marlboro Man? Tobacco was an accepted part of our culture. For generations, Aboriginal communities treated tobacco as sacred. Packets of cigarettes were even included in soldiers' rations during World War I and World War II, and handed out to Holocaust survivors after their liberation.

The cultivation of tobacco in Canada began in the 1950s, and until the mid-80s, it was a respectable family farming operation. Today, tobacco is still a "legal" crop in Canada. Yet many Canadian tobacco growers have sold their quota and experiment with other crops—vegetables, ginseng and tofu beans. Acts of redemption? Perhaps, but mostly acts of survival. As part of the tobacco supply chain, my family still feels the sting of society's condemnation of tobacco; we are conflicted about our role in an industry that causes cancer. Public furor over the perceived greed and dishonesty of villainous tobacco manufacturing companies—profiled in box-office movies like *Thank You for Smoking*—directly impacts the lives of tobacco producers and the wider communities where they live. There is no rational way to put Big Tobacco, cancer victims and tobacco producers into separate boxes.

During my tenure at law school, where I focused on business law, our family farm was expropriated by Ontario Hydro to build a high voltage power line to the United States. *Yet another razor-sharp fence to straddle.* I witnessed my parents' helplessness and experienced my own. Others in the community thought that my parents should be thrilled with the financial stability that a corporate buy-out provided. But, these people didn't understand. Ontario Hydro had the legal right to force my parents to relocate

from a family farm. Although the company's negotiators were well-intended, they did not truly seem to comprehend the enormity of the personal impacts that came with their cheque and a forced relocation.

It's not always easy for others to see that my two feet are in different places. When I go back to visit my family on the farm, they sometimes choose to see me as a woman from their community, remembering me fondly as the girl who liked to go barefoot in the tobacco fields, and to my mother's enormous dismay, even in the feedlot. And, when I'm negotiating on behalf of an oil company, in Indonesia or in northern Alberta, it's hard for locals to see me as anything but the face of that oil company. Think about your own situation. When you go into your local grocery store, or to church on Sunday, how do people see you: as a farmer or rancher or citizen in their rural community, or as someone from the oil patch? Can they see that you are *straddling*?

In the last decade, I've focused on bridging relationships between host communities, investors, governments and advocates in the oil patch⁴—squarely planting myself in that '*in between*' place. This means I work with citizens in communities where oil companies operate, to build local capacity to constructively discuss community priorities with these investors and regulators. And, I work with oil companies to guide them in their understanding of the expectations of local citizens and even critics.

Being in this *in between* place isn't always easy, but over time, I've grown more comfortable in this role. I cannot change my history: I do have one foot in the agricultural sector and one foot in the oil patch. What I can do is consider how I use these experiences—the straddling of these two very different shores—to encourage better understandings and bridge relationships. So, I offer you yet another image, that of a *bridge*—and invite you to think about how you, as a Christian, can *bridge* relationships and understandings between rural communities where you live and the oil patch.



People often accuse me of having a bridge fetish. And, it's true: I like bridges. I like driving over long suspension bridges. When I'm hiking, I like balancing on logs thrown across mountain streams by fellow hikers. In Calgary, I even like the plus-15s; bridges connecting buildings so we don't have to freeze walking outside in the winter.

⁴ Check out my blog at <http://integritybridges.com/category/blog/> if you are interested in corporate integrity, political integrity, community integrity, gender integrity.

To me, a bridge is a metaphor for our human capacity to connect two different sides. A bridge over a river connects the river's two banks. A pedestrian overpass over a highway connects two sides of a road. A bridge **only** exists because there are opposite sides...a bridge **needs** two poles.

Who are the *bridge-builders*...those people who connect the poles? Faith leaders are the most obvious bridgers between the spiritual realms and the physical world. Usually though, we have an image of faith leaders trying to lead their fold across the bridge in the direction of heaven...and not the other way around. But bridges—especially those built for people— usually encourage two-way traffic. For that reason, I've encouraged faith leaders in Fort McMurray Alberta, home to Canada's oilsands, to help locals respond to their critics. The idea isn't for faith leaders to 'God-wash' the issues in Fort McMurray, but to build bridges between the polarized debates that people seem to be stuck in right now. Recall the minister who is interviewed in the movie *The Corporation*; he had many Enron employees in his congregation and knew something was wrong. His testimony in this movie is quite powerful.

Public dialogue on the oilsands seems to break down along two lines: *resource vs. place*. And, I believe you will readily appreciate these distinctions here in southern Alberta and in Montana. As a *resource*, we talk of jobs, trickle-down economics, stronger tax bases, competitiveness, relative options, training, technology, and innovation. As a *place*, we focus on the physical and human environment, Aboriginals, capacity (voice), relationships, and ask if we are ethical – *are we living good lives?*

Bridging the space between our focus on *resource* and *place* is challenging. But it is critical if we want to support the development of communities that can have an ethical response to these questions. I believe faith leaders can play a critical role in building these bridges. And, I would say the same to each one of you. You do straddle the oil patch and the rural community. This is your reality. This is your backyard.

To build a credible and legitimate bridge between *resource v. place*—between the oil patch and rural communities—we need individuals, like you, who speak with authenticity and experience. We need people who genuinely care about the citizens in the community...people who have a comprehensive understanding of their dilemmas. You can be a bridge builder. You just have to be open to the value of creating connection between polarities...and be willing to try to create this breathing space even in (especially in) times of chaos or crisis.

To straddle this space *in between*, to build resilient bridges, it's helpful to accept that the issues you are dealing with are complex. Of course, you care. But making headway through complex issues can be daunting. Bill Gates' wisdom to Harvard's 2007 graduating class resonates: "*The barrier to change is not too little caring; it is too much complexity.*"

Simple is following a recipe to bake a cake. Anyone can follow the steps; and you have a measurable result—a yummy cake or a flop—in a short period of time.

Complicated is sending a rocket to the moon. You set your long term vision; secure funding; break the longer term objective down into bite-size project steps; engage engineers and scientists; and step by sequential step achieve this momentous target.

*Complex*⁵ is raising a child. There is no one way to do it. Each step has multiple effects which feed back and influence the next step or decision. What is most important is asking the *right questions*—rather than prescribing the right answer—and establishing *resilient relationships* that can withstand bumps in the road.

In your community, what questions are you asking? And, what relationships do you need to strengthen?

In Fort McMurray, a survey conducted last year by the local Chamber of Commerce—my **COMMUNITY** my **VOICE**— helped citizens in that community to prioritize the questions they wanted to ask. Questions like: “*What services are most important to citizens in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and where do citizens want tax dollars spent? And, who speaks for the community?*” Over 1400 residents participated in the survey, online or via face-to-face discussions, representing a wide and diverse cross-section of that community. Sorting out who *really* speaks for citizens in a community is not easy. “Public participation” and “stakeholder engagement” have become code words for legitimization of unwelcome projects. The Fort McMurray Chamber’s capacity and will to conduct an independent and inclusive survey of local citizens in the Wood Buffalo region is in line with a growing trend of citizen-led polls, surveys, referendums, petitions and other experiments with direct democracy initiated by communities.⁶

More importantly, the survey outcomes became a jumping off place for rational and transparent discussion⁷ on other tough questions: *Now that we have a clearer sense of community priorities, how can we work together to design and implement cross-sectoral strategies that can really respond to these deficiencies? And, how will we measure the progress of these strategies...not just within our individual organizations and communities, but on an integrated basis?*

What questions do **you** want to talk about here in southern Alberta and in Montana? Here are just a few sample questions you may want to consider:

- What do you see as the pros and cons of oil development in your community?
- What are the struggles you observe for local citizens most directly impacted by oil patch development?
- Who speaks for your community?
- What is working and what isn’t working ...in your opinion?
- How would you respond to outsiders who demonize the oil sector as “evil”?
- What would a ‘sinless’ oil project look like?
- What does the soul of this place look like?
- How does a place reclaim its soul?

⁵ For more on complexity, see *Getting to Maybe* by authors Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Patton (Random House, 2006) and *Gentle Action* by quantum physicist, F. David Peat (Pari Publishing, 2008).

⁶ For example, the European Citizens Initiatives will come into effect soon—one million E.U. citizens will be able to ask the European Commission to put forward new draft laws. Skeptics refer to this as a “ticking bomb of populism.”

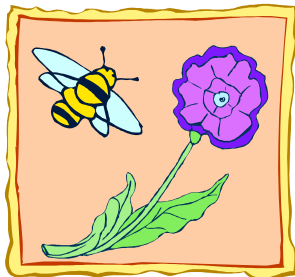
⁷ Curiously, if you look at the etymological meaning of “discussion”, you will find the following meanings: “a shaking”, “strike asunder, break up”, “to shake”, “smash apart”, to “scatter, disperse”. We’re not exactly talking about polite conversation! Maybe a breaking apart of old ways of framing issues which hopefully can lead to a more constructive rebuilding.

Dialogue is good, of course. Dialogue can deepen the story. Personal story-telling sparks the soul and allows us to go beyond the imposed or organizational faces of individuals...it allows us to look at issues from a human perspective. As you move deeper into these issues, you also need to step back from time to time to look at the story that you are creating and your role in this story.

The prevailing myth of the big bad oil company pursuing its own self-interest—with little regard to the impacts on vulnerable citizens—is the story that I was spoon-fed growing up in a farming community in south western Ontario. We've been working on this narrative for centuries now, assuming that in an economic exchange people and organizations are programmed to act in their own self-interest. In his most famous passage from the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith wrote: "*It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love...*"⁸ We've latched on to this notion that self-interest is the only force influencing economic decision-makers. Yet we aren't just "economic beings": We belong to many communities when we make a business decision. Even Adam Smith agreed that there are many other motivations that influence human action and behaviour—motivations like "*humanity, justice, generosity and public spirit.*"⁹ If we don't recognize our reflexive attachment to this story, and start to question its assumptions, we risk locking ourselves inside stereotypical straightjackets with very limited capacity to straddle or to act as a bridge.

It's not likely that you sought out this role—to be a bridge connecting rural communities and the oil patch. Sometimes it's difficult to fully understand our purpose in all of this. God knows... I have questions. For me, this is a journey of faith.

Let me finish with the story of the honey bee.



Every day the honey bee gets up and says to herself, I've got to go gather nectar from those flowering plants and bring it back to the hive. For the honey bee, her purpose is clear: she gathers nectar to sustain her hive.

In gathering nectar for her hive, that honey bee also spreads pollen from plant to plant, cross-pollinating all the plants she touches and making germination possible. By pollinating the plants, the honey bee makes all life on Earth possible, including human life.

The honey bee believes she is here on Earth to serve the others in her hive. And yet we know that the bee's true purpose is much, much greater.

Thank you.

⁸ For an excellent review of this point, see Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759.