

RAFE HERE ... I have often said such things as “*we must be our own media if we want to accomplish anything.*”

I received the following letter and it makes the point, like I never could, that one person supported by others can make one hell of a big difference.

Oh, yes, please pass this on!

Friday, August 05, 2011

Lessons from a swim in the Gorge

We went for a swim Monday, about two blocks from home, in the Gorge waterway. We swam in the salt water as the tidal currents swept under the Tillicum Bridge toward Portage Inlet.

It was just a swim. And it was more. Because even 15 years ago, I wouldn't have ventured into the questionable Gorge waters. The swim was a reminder that even when things are truly wrecked, we can fix them. All it takes is one person with the will to start.

The Gorge is an urban waterway that extends inland from Victoria's harbour until it widens into Portage Inlet.

There are a few creeks feeding into the inlet and the Gorge, but the big influence is tidal. Water surges in, and out. The rapids under the Tillicum Bridge run one way, then the other.

In the last 120 years, the Gorge has gone full circle. Its heyday was the late 19th and early 20th century. First Nations had fished for herring and salmon and used it as a gathering place for centuries.

Victorians travelled in boats and by wagon and streetcar to the Gorge narrows to picnic, enjoy the natural setting and listen to concerts.

In 1911, as Dennis Minaker noted in his book, *The Gorge of Summers Gone*, the British Columbia Railway Company built its own

version of Coney Island at the narrows to encourage more people to use the streetcar line. There was a rollercoaster and an early version of Splash Mountain that sent terrified customers down a steep ramp in small boats that plunged into the Gorge.

The water was always central to the activities. People swam and boated and gathered clams. There were races and exhibitions and bathhouses. Promoters built towers and staged diving shows - until, in 1922, 19-year-old Billy Muir was paralysed in a 110-foot dive. He died three years later.

But a few decades into the 20th century, the Gorge waterway was too polluted for anyone but the foolhardy to go swimming.

Residential development all along its length and around Portage Inlet meant increasing runoff, often with storm water and sewage spilling into the waters. Industry along the harbour and Gorge had added its own toxic legacies over Victoria's early years. And the Gorge had become a dumping ground for unwanted items large and small.

It was fine for boaters, but its attractiveness for swimmers - and its once-rich environment - seemed to be lost forever.

But John Roe didn't think so. In 1994, he and his nine-year-old son started spending their days hauling stuff out of the water - shopping carts, rusted metal, car tires.

It seemed, frankly, nutty - a classically quixotic exercise in the impossible. The Gorge seemed too far gone for any effort to succeed, let alone one driven by one man and a boy in their spare time. But individual efforts can have a powerful effect.

Other people started helping haul stuff from the water or contributed money. Scuba divers volunteered to pull up the junk Roe couldn't reach. Business and governments offered support.

Roe, who had covered all the initial expenses, led the formation of the Veins of Life Watershed Society.

Grants and donations paid for equipment and bigger workforces. The cleanup efforts moved beyond pulling junk from the water and started focusing on stopping the flow of pollutants.

And at some point, there was a transformation. It was no longer accepted as an inevitable that the Gorge would remain unusable.

Instead, its recovery was seen as the imperative. By 2000, a symbolic milestone Roe had set was reached. The Gorge was the site, for the first time in 65 years, of a swimming race. Today, the transformation is remarkable. Salmon have returned, cormorants and eagles perch in trees along the waterway and herons and kingfishers haunt the shoreline. Emerald green eelgrass beds wave in the tides and otters and seals fish in the water.

And all because one man and a boy took a look at the state of the Gorge and decided to do something about it.

It's worth remembering, in these days of problems that seem too large or complex to yield to our efforts. And pondering - perhaps as you enjoy a swim in the Gorge on a sunny afternoon.