

Passion: Brian Meehan

By Eileen Sung

“I am a big believer in self-doubt,” declares Brian Meehan, Executive Director of Museum London in London, Ontario. “A little self-doubt is not a bad thing, just as long as it doesn’t paralyze you and doesn’t stand in the way of you doing what you really want to do.” As an English major who recently switched from business, I sit dumbfounded regarding his refreshing approach to success. After being surrounded on a daily basis by cliché self-belief posters and memes, it is astonishingly nice to hear someone present insecurity as a saving grace. In fact, Meehan thinks “sometimes people aren’t successful because they don’t have enough self-doubt.”

Could anyone have ever thought that Meehan – who along with his duties at Museum London has juggled being both the chair of Pillar Non-profit Network and the chair of the Canadian Arts Museum Directors Organization (CAMDO) – once doubted or occasionally still doubts himself? Born and raised in Calgary, Alberta, his post-secondary education began at the Alberta College of Art. I reveal that prior to Western University, I lived in Calgary for 12 years. We chat for a while about our respective high schools. I was in the public system and he was in the Catholic one, so there were no hard feelings. After two years at the Alberta College of Art, he moved to Halifax where he studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art of Design and Montreal where he took Communication Studies at Concordia University. He then worked as a corporate curator in Calgary at NOVA Corporation for four years before moving on to Owen Sound where he was the director of Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery. He regales me with a story illustrating how chancy life can be: when he initially approached the post at Owen Sound, it was as a courtesy to a friend who was always trying to find him opportunities, which he consistently refused. “I kept feeling bad that I always said no to his help so I thought I would go through the motions, take a

drive up, and then I'll say 'it just wasn't for me'. Then I got up there and absolutely loved the place."

Meehan stayed in Owen Sound for four years before he was offered the position at Museum London.

Each place is what he calls "a stepping stone" to his goal in the here and now.

So where is this self-doubt? It is clear that in this rather chancy field of art, he never ceased pursuing his passion. He steadfastly enrolled in art courses and believed "that if you do what you love, opportunities will arise, especially if you're quite passionate about it." Possessing none of the certainty he had at my age, I ask if he always knew he wanted to be in Art. He responds that even at an early age, he always enjoyed drawing then always took Art if it was offered in school. I push on and tentatively question the support of his family. He replies, sympathetically, "so often you don't get the support of parents, and my parents were the same. They just couldn't see a future to make a living in the field [of art]." Laughingly he adds "they had to take me at my word that I wasn't going to be living at home for the rest of my life." Seeing the plain admiration on my face since I definitely do not have the certainty to assure my parents when they doubt my fanciful choice of studies, he elaborates on his choice: "I never really went into it thinking that it would provide a career for me."

What would it be like to have such an uncompromising love for what you studied that you have no fear years of your life will not be wasted? He continues: "I never set out to be here. I just responded to things, and it almost sounds like drifting in the wind in many ways. I think you create some of the opportunities for yourself, whether you're doing it consciously or not."

His experiences reflect his statement. Similar to so many others, leadership was thrust upon Meehan rather than actively sought. Originally, he studied to be an artist but found that he did not possess the drive that compelled artists to make art. Instead he discovered that he enjoyed the curating aspect more. Of his experience in Owen Sound, he says, "Looking and assessing opportunities when they come along is a real critical thing. You can end up in a whole bunch of different places depending on the

decisions you make.” It is fortunate, then, that of all the opportunities Meehan waved away, he chose the Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery.

Meehan’s passion for art and for the organizations he’s worked for are evident in the way he speaks about his collective duties. Even when speaking of government funding for the arts, which is part of CAMDO’s collective concerns, Meehan still displays enthusiasm: “Ontario is a reasonably generous province.” It was clear that the comparison was to a conservative province such as Alberta where “so many people see the arts as frivolous or even a threat.” He goes on to explain that “normally it is the most outrageous stuff that makes it to the news; usually stuff that’s offensive, controversial or lots of money was spent and the public can’t see why. There is a definite correlation between a liberal mindset and support for the arts.” Funding for the Arts sector was one of the first cuts made in Alberta with the down-turn of the economy, whereas so far Ontario has managed to leave that portion of the budget untouched. Brian adds, “It [the cut] may still be coming, and how it plays out for us is hard to know. Up until now, it’s been a very pleasant surprise. So far, so good.” He follows that statement by literally knocking on wood.

With Pillar, Meehan found himself in a position of leadership similar to his role in CAMDO. I marvelled that he is able to balance so many responsibilities. Brian wryly concedes that “there are days where it feels like it.” He says of leadership, “there’s only so much you can do, because the time you spend doing that is time you’re not spending doing something else. And I’m so fortunate to have such a great group here. We’ve got a great management staff, great people in all our positions which allows me to do all that.” Before taking on projects or roles he advises an “honest self-assessment of whether or not you have the time to do it to your satisfaction and satisfaction of everyone involved in the organization.” Of his Chair positions, Meehan comments that “normally people ask you to take that position because they are comfortable that you’ve what it takes. I guess the fact other people thought that I could [lead] and I did, definitely speaks to the fact that I was born to lead; that I want to have that

opportunity to play a bigger role than to just be a member. So yes, I'm a control freak." He gestures to his spotless office, excepting a few pieces of paper on his desk, and informs me that this is as messy as his office gets.

Naturally we flow into the deliberation of nature versus nurture in the making of a leader. He wonders "how many people out there in leadership positions have that kind of [orderly] compulsion"? Brian argues that "there's a reasonable amount of nature" and we agree that one needs the right experiences to hone that potential and develop that skill. I inquire if he thinks people who have voluntarily stepped into roles of responsibility (such as student council, club executives, event committees) all their life are better prepared for the pressure of the work world. I am selfishly relieved to learn he was a keener in high school too, giving me some meager hope for my future. He assures me, "the fact that you've been doing variations of [leadership] all your life [means that] you have this reservoir of experiences and memories [where you have] felt overwhelmed [and thought] 'I'm going to crash and burn'; and you realized that in those circumstances you got through. I think that helps you with those difficult times. You still have those sleepless nights but probably not as intensely."

I ask him if he thinks he has a stubborn personality. He contemplates my question for only a moment before giving a definitive "Yes." We both burst out laughing. We then ponder the possibility of whether or not he would thrive lower down on the hierarchy since he has a "natural desire to shape things." "I would be really interested to see how I would react. I can't say for sure I'd be okay with it, but the real test would be if there was some ability to have some autonomy at my own level." Ultimately, he believes he could take direction from someone else under the condition that there was room for creativity and ownership.

Despite his strong personality, his team rarely butts heads. He states he is surrounded by great people who are often on the same page. Brian tells me that "there are two types of people; people who hire people that challenge them and there's those who hire people who reinforce. I think for an

organization to thrive, you have to have the courage to hire some people who are going to challenge you.” In light of such a philosophy, I pressure him that there must be times when he has to exercise his final veto power. Meehan explains that there are two aspects to the museum: exhibitions and the permanent display. Exhibitions are temporary so if one was a mistake, it is easily forgotten. The permanent collection, on the other hand, is as its name suggests – permanent. He clarifies that “there are works in the collection that now that we’ve had them for 20-30 years, we can easily see those were bad decisions. They were bad works by artists who have basically faded from history. Building a collection is not a science, it really is an art. You’re writing history when you’re putting a collection together because those are the things that will remain. And the ones that you don’t acquire are the one that are going to be forgotten.” The concept that one is literally deciding and holding history in one’s hands is intoxicating. I observe that kind of influence on future generations sounds like stressful grounds for some serious disagreements with Melanie Townsend, the Head of Exhibitions and Collections, and her team, Maya Hirschman (Curator of Regional History) and Cassandra Getty (Curator of Art). Meehan states, “We have our disagreements but we all have our own areas of expertise and I have a lot of respect for their professionalism and their judgement.”

This prompts us to discuss more about Museum London’s emphasis. He describes it as a “London focus with a national context.” I inquire why it isn’t more international. He replies with such a logical reply I feel foolish for asking the question. “When people come here, both from the community and from the outside, a lot of them want to know what’s happened in London. There have been great artists who have lived here and continue to live here so I think it’s our responsibility to tell that story to our visitors. It gives people a greater understanding of this community.” One of the museum’s current exhibitions is Wonderwall, which Meehan describes as “a potpourri of stuff.” The show is an opportunity to give people a look at the more interesting artifacts of history. It also allows the museum to fulfill the history side of their dual mandate, which Meehan feels they don’t do as good of a job of as the art side.

As a closing question, I ask who has inspired him the most. I explain that I credit my literature fanaticism to my many amazing English teachers throughout the years, but much of my personality and values stem from one particular teacher (Mrs. Metz) in my adolescent years. He tells me about his high school art teacher who never treated his course as an 'easy A course' but required a professional level of dedication from his students. He stayed in contact with his art teacher after graduation. I question if he thinks some of his leadership style has subconsciously been a result of being exposed to such an earnest way of teaching. After a short musing, he answers that he'll have to think about it. I voice my wish of one day inspiring someone the way Mrs. Metz influenced me. He thinks for a bit about my aspiration and replies, "I think probably the best way to that is to be doing things you love. I don't think we're ever conscious of the impact we have on other people. As long as you're true to yourself and you're doing things for the right reasons and you're engaged in doing something you love, that you're passionate about, by your example people pick it up."

What a reflective idea! I spoke with him for two hours and emerged contemplating his complex character. Perhaps this is the secret to success as a leader: the ability to empathize with people and to be personable. Here is a self-made man with all the justification to be a pretentious aesthete. However, he humbly credits his team for making his accomplishments possible. Even with all his pressing concerns, Meehan did not dismiss the chance to help this 19 year-old English student with her class assignment. From the beginning of the interview, we were (or at least I was) laughing until the end. Compassionate enough to spend time talking to me about my what-has-to-seem-like inconsequential woes compared to his responsibilities: doubt about my ambitions and general disenchantment with university. Discussing with me my passion for English and what options were open for me, he not only encourages me but shares with me that if he could have any other occupation, he would like to be an

editor. He gushes that the construction of words fascinates him: “I love how changing a single word in a sentence can make such a dramatic difference.”

Meehan is the best example of someone who practices what he preaches. Conversing about something he is passionate about, being true to what he genuinely believes, he is completely unaware of the impact he has made on me. I have been infected by his love for the Arts and the belief that passion will pave the road to one’s goals. So what if I am an English student and am no longer in business? As he says, “Even if you fail and survive, that’s not a bad thing. As long as you learn from it and are not afraid to fail again.” He summarizes his journey so far by giving this piece of advice: “you never know what things lead to. Stay open to going to different places that you might not think you want to go to. Treat them as stepping stones to the place that you ultimately want to get to. If you expect too much too early, you do yourself a disservice. Stay open to opportunities. In a sense, say yes a lot.”