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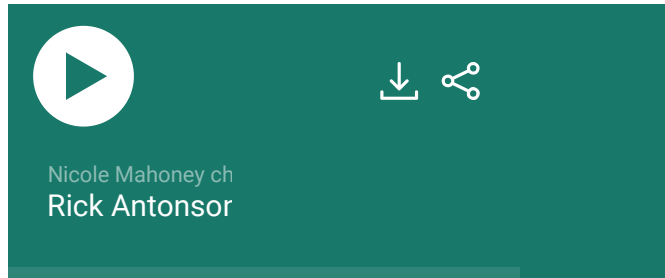


Destination on the Left

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Episode 44: Use Cathedral Thinking to Create a Brighter Future, with Rick Antonson



In this episode, you will learn about the important idea of Cathedral Thinking from Rick Antonson.

Rick Antonson is the former president & CEO of the international award-winning destination marketing organization, Tourism Vancouver. Among his volunteer leadership roles, Rick was president of Pacific Coast Public Television, chair of Destination Marketing Association International (based in Washington, DC), and deputy chair of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (based in Bangkok, Thailand).

Rick collaborated with leaders of other organizations to initiate the Vancouver Convention Centre Expansion Task Force. He was at the helm of Tourism Vancouver when the organization launched the bid to bring the 2010 Winter Olympic Games to Vancouver and Whistler.

Today Rick is a full-time author and scriptwriter. The New York Times noted his *Route 66 Still Kicks; Driving America's Main Street* as "One of the best books of the bunch" in their Christmas travel book roundup. The Chicago Tribune called his *To Timbuktu for a Haircut; A Journey Through West Africa* a "travel classic." When his

most recent book, *Full Moon Over Noah's Ark; An Odyssey to Mount Ararat* was released last year, the American Library Journal saw it as this tasty, spicy feast of a book”

Rick speaks frequently around the world about Cathedral Thinking and is a strong believer that tourism is a vital force for peace.

More on Rick's Background

Thank you so much for joining me, Rick.

Nicole, thank you for having me.

I'm very excited to talk to you today. For our listeners' sake, the two of us have connected because of the website and blog that you have on Cathedral Thinking, so I'm really excited to dive into that. Before we get started, I'd like to have you share a little bit more about your background and give some context about who you are and where you've been on your journey.

Well, I've been fortunate to have a great journey because I've been in the tourism business. That has brought about lots of experiences, amazing friends, and fantastic colleagues from all over the world. That's what happens in that particular field of activity. Before I was involved in destination marketing, I was with Rocky Mountaineer, which is probably the most spectacular train trip in the world. I was their initial vice president of sales and marketing. That's the train that connects Vancouver and Calgary with the Rocky Mountains in Jasper and Banff. It's extraordinary, and that brought about a lot of opportunity for me in the way of new market development because people from around the world travel to have that train experience. That was something that was exciting.

My wife is in the aviation business and was general manager with Cairns Airport in Australia, so we spent some time there. Before that, she was in Edinburgh as head of aviation with the airport there. She recently accepted a position as vice president of Star Alliance, and their headquarters is in Frankfurt, Germany. That's our new home away from Vancouver home. All of those things have been little steps into looking at the world through the eyes or the senses of other people, other cultures, and that's amazing.

Yeah, that is really amazing. What a blessing to have that opportunity to have lived in so many different places and to see the world in so many different places. We're going to talk a little bit later in our conversation today about your latest book and the other books that you have, but from reading your latest book, I did learn something I thought was interesting about you, and that is that you go to these lesser-known destinations and really seek out kind of that adventure. I think that that's really unique and an interesting way to travel.

There is something about being in a location, wherever it is, and asking yourself, "How did I get here? Why am I here?" and encountering the unexpected. That's when travel becomes more real in many ways, and I think what anyone in the field of destination marketing wants to deliver up is the opportunity for the visitor to do the things that they want to do that are maybe on a little bit of a checklist, but also to encounter locals, to learn through them, to have a sense of the personality of a place, to be in the moment as a traveler and say, "Gosh, I am really in this city. I am really in this village. I am really in this country, and the food in front of me is something I've never seen before."

Yeah, I love that, encountering the unexpected. I think that's great. That's really, really good inspiration right there.

Cathedral Thinking

Before we talk about your book and some of your other travels, one of the things that I'm really excited to learn more from you about is this whole idea of Cathedral Thinking. I had attended the Destinations International, formally DMAI, conference last July in Montreal. I don't know if it was you, but somebody from stage used the term "Cathedral Thinking." I didn't even note who the speaker was, but I wrote the words down in my notebook. When I came back to my office I Googled it to learn more and discovered your website. I just think it's such a great concept, a really good illustration of what can be done, especially in our tourism industry. I'd like to spend some time kind of exploring this whole concept and what that means to tourism. Can we start with a definition of Cathedral Thinking, and maybe how you stumbled upon it?

Well, first of all, it was me from stage. I had been invited to introduce Tammy Blount, the new chair of DI.

That's what it was. That's right.

She and I used to work together at Tourism Vancouver and she's gone on to be CEO of a number of destinations in the U.S. and is now in California. As the incoming chair, she is someone that I know is herself a cathedral thinker and has applied it in a number of different instances. That was how the reference came up. My encounter with it happened decades ago, and I don't know where it was or how it stayed a bit of residue in my mind, but more recently, some years ago when my wife, Janice, was working in Edinburgh, we were there on Christmas Eve. We went to St. Mary's Cathedral which is a big, beautiful building. There might have been a thousand other people there for the evening's inspiration and motivating service, and there were instruments from all over the world. It was a real eclectic experience. Afterwards, we were walking home and stopped for a glass of wine and got talking about the building of that cathedral. I mentioned Cathedral Thinking, and it was something I hadn't referenced myself probably for decades. Janice and I talked about it.

When I got back, it was January. I usually have a handful of speaking engagements at the start of any year in those days I was with Tourism Vancouver, and I kept on referencing Cathedral Thinking briefly at the end of each presentation. People kept on asking, "Tell me more about that." The more is this, that if you were an architect in the 1400s and your town, your village, your city came to you and asked you to design the new cathedral, you would begin a project which you knew you would not live to see completed. If I was the stone mason and I was putting in place the foundation blocks or the cornerstone, I'd be doing so knowing that it would be a grandson or a granddaughter, of my own or of a neighbor's, who would be doing the final touches as the cathedral completed long after I'd passed away.

It is the only way to keep the living generation tethered to the future. It's about doing things today that are very important, intrinsically so, but the beneficiaries may not yet be born. It helps us in a simple way to conceive of the importance of long-term thinking, of being involved, each of us, in unfinished work, and seeing that what we do today has to have way to be built upon, not just by a colleague in contemporary times, but by a son and

daughter, a future colleague that may join our firm or our organization or our community long after we ourselves have left it. It is keeping in mind that the details, the importance, the integrity that we approach today's work with needs to be able to be applicable for others to bring new tools, new skills of a new generation, and continue the good work.



“Cathedral Thinking is about keeping the living generation tethered to the future.” – @inkroadsRick #Podcast

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That’s really awesome. What I wrote down was, “Keeping the living generation tethered to the future.” I find that very inspiring and motivating actually. Then this whole idea of being involved in unfinished work, which seems like just a really different way of thinking, right? Because we all have our to-do lists, or we have our projects, and usually a project has a start and a finish to it and we’re not done with it ’till we’re finished with it. How do people actually practice this type of thinking?

First of all, it comes from an awareness of the moment. What was isn’t, and what is won’t be. We are but transitory in nature of all of the work that we do. It’s our moment to do the best we can and to set our successors up for their own elements of success. By thinking of that, I think we bring a different element of sincerity to the current workload because we know that it’s not about us. It’s about what we’re doing. It’s about the task at hand, being able to enable others to do their jobs better. That could be colleagues. It could be within a community setting. It could be for a task force that has seemingly short-term timelines, but when it’s done it has to have

accomplished something that is but the start of whatever somebody else does next. It's like a journey. Whenever you complete a journey, you're different. You're a different person than when you started out, but that new person is who you personally take into your next journey. You begin your next journey different than you began your last journey. I think we need to feel that way about the paraphernalia and all of the other stuff we wrap ourselves up on a daily basis. It's not about now. It is about the future.

Yeah. You know, what I find interesting about that is this whole idea of where this comes from, back in the 1400s literally laying bricks and building with bricks or stone. This whole idea of building blocks, and this idea of what you just said, which is it's the start of whatever someone else does next. You're really constantly in life, I guess, laying the foundation and building, and you really do never finish it, even if you do check it off that list.

And knowing that, having that self-awareness, is extremely important. I know one of the things, and I've been involved with this as a destination marketing organization executive, and I've watched others who have been involved in what I'm going to say, and that's dealing with elected officials, be they at the national, federal level, be they at the state or provincial level, be they at the city level or township level. One of our struggles in the tourism industry, and I would say this is a struggle if not today, it was three months ago or it will be in two years, for each and every person working in a destination marketing organization or an affiliate type of beast is with elected officials, to get them to think beyond their mandate and act beyond their tenure. Think beyond their mandate and act beyond their tenure.

I know what it's like for so many, probably many, many of your listeners, to have been in front of a city council that has another year left in their term, and you're proposing something that may not be activated for four years or five years. Or if you're involved in an expansion of a convention center, it may not exist for another 10 years, but decisions need to be taken today. Elected officials often have a self-imposed horizon which is the next election. If that's six months away, or two years away, that's only how far they look. I think that we see this exemplify itself certainly in Canadian politics, American politics, German politics, Thailand politics. So many people are fixated as elected officials on the near-term

and can't look 30, 40 years down the road. That's a shame. In tourism, we need elected officials to embrace DMOs and other entities with the view of, "Where is our city going to be, or our region going to be, in 10 years or 30 years?" That's Cathedral Thinking.

Yeah. Absolutely. I totally agree. I'm wondering with all of the work that you've done, either with Vancouver Tourism or just in your many roles around the world working with DMOs and destination marketers, where you've observed kind of that Cathedral Thinking kind of at its best if you will in the tourism industry.

Well, because we have the website cathedralthinking.com, which actually Tourism Vancouver acquired from the founder, and now a friend, Darren, and myself are the custodians of it, we quite often get a Google alert that somebody has done something and mentioned Cathedral Thinking. Then we right away connect with them and ask if we could post it on the site because it's a not-for-profit site. We had nothing to do with originating the concept. We're just apostles and want more people to embrace it.

We've encountered some fascinating uses. There's one group that applies Cathedral Thinking to water purification. Not the mechanics of purifying it, but the preservation of good, clean water, or in zones where it doesn't exist, trying to create it and then maintain it with a view that 30, 40 years from now, children, families that aren't even born yet will have clean water. That I heard of in a radio interview that was taking place in Australia. Another instance is a group in Scotland that uses the notion of Cathedral Thinking and applies it to nature conservancy. They've got plans to preserve land not because they need it today, but if they don't preserve it today, it will not be there for generations in 30, 40 years.

I think another application of Cathedral Thinking has been around major events. I'll use the Olympics as something that quite often for a destination that is bid to host the Olympics, Winter Olympics, Summer Olympics, they've actually bid two or three times before they're successful. That's true for Oslo, Mexico City, Vancouver, many, many other places, South Korea, PyeongChang. It's the notion that what you're doing today is laying the foundation, because the first bid when it wasn't successful, put in place a lot of learnings and understandings. It was different people who took the

second bid forwards. Then when the third bid went forward, it built on the first two. When it was successful, it was still 10 years before the event actually happened, and in many cases, the people who had led the first bid 50 years before had passed away and it was their grandchildren that were welcoming the athletes and maybe competing in the Olympics. But that never would have happened without the original visionaries 50 years ago. That's Cathedral Thinking.



“Bidding for the Olympics is an example of Cathedral Thinking” – @inkroadsRick #Podcast

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That's a great example actually, the Olympics and that long vision that one has to have, especially with something like the Olympics because it's not just the bidding process, but then it's all the infrastructure. You really have to get to work once you win those, don't you?

Well, and part of what happens when you've got something like the Olympics coming is that it does focus the elected officials, as mentioned, on making decisions that they have to take. For example, in Vancouver, there was a rapid transit, a really important one connecting the airport and downtown in the community of Richmond with downtown Vancouver. It was very necessary. Elected officials twice turned it down. We were quite involved in lobbying and forming a consortium of about a hundred different entities that pushed and pushed and pushed for a third vote, which was successful. But what we said to them at the time is if they didn't take the decision then, it would not be ready for the Olympics in 2010 when they were coming to Vancouver and Whistler, and that if we didn't take it with that deadline ahead of

us, they'd never be forced to face the need to modify public ways of transit. In a city like Vancouver, as in many other cities, elected officials have to make a choice. You either design infrastructure to move cars, or you design infrastructure to move people. We were pushing for the need to move people. That rapid transit, which opened in time for the Olympics, far exceeded its three, four-year forecasts in the early months and has been a phenomenal success.

It's also been extremely good for the environment, and Cathedral Thinking allows people to think about, "What are the long-term impacts on the environment? What are the impacts of climate change?" Not to debate whether or not there's climate change, to simply say, "There's a lot of science out there that we don't consider this now in the impacts of 20, 30, 40 years down the road, by the time we get down the road, if it's real, it's too late." Taking decisions today, elected officials, us in our own businesses, or our own lives, is about putting in place something and being tenacious about following it through.

Yeah. That's really great. I just love how broad it can be, and beyond just let's say a project of the Olympics, but then those kind of broader impacts that can come about when you open your mind in that way.

So true.

Cathedral Thinking in Action

Now, you mentioned your website. We've mentioned your website a couple of times, or the website that you're the steward of. There are a couple of stories on there, some examples from tourism and kind of through hospitality history if you will. One's about Ellsworth Statler and the other one about Kemmons Wilson. Can you share a little bit? Am I putting you on the spot with this question?

Well, no. I mean, it's fair to put me on the spot. Rather than maybe pick a couple of individuals, one can speak to the community benefits of individuals who came up with a plan, whether it was in the field of say a restaurant, food service, and wanting to brand things in a very positive way and see that grow, see that flourish, not in their own hands, but in the hands of others that they helped train, and see new people bring additional

skills. I was invited to speak to a group in Chicago recently, and they're all individual consultants, some of them very prominent in tourism hospitality. What we ended up discussing after I had spoken about Cathedral Thinking, sort of laid the floorboards down, was their realization that whoever takes over their firms will be doing so with skills and ideas and insights that they themselves do not have and could not bring to the work they're doing.

What became very important in their conversation was that in order to enable future generations to continue their firm, they had to make sure that they infused their values as pillars of what those people built on. It wasn't that they were going to say, "This is how you mechanically do what I need you to do," whether it's in the food service business or in starting a hotel chain business or whether it's in the consulting business with lots of data interpretation. It was about saying, "Here are three or four things that are absolutely of paramount importance when you build on what I have done today when I'm no longer involved." It wasn't to say "integrity." It was to say in another phrasing, "Whatever you do, don't lie. Whatever you do with the data, don't manipulate it for your own goals. Study it, determine what it's saying, lay out the options, guide people to choose a good option, but do not become a fabricator with the use of the data."

We see all the time. We've seen this with big banks that take absolute short-term advantage. Not to pick on the banks, but let's pick on the banks. They certainly are if not guilty, they're sort of culpable in a lot of ways of many instances of thinking very, very short-term. The result of the short-term thinking has been that they lost integrity. They lost trust, and many, many people had their own lives damaged as a result of short-term, selfish prerogatives. I think when you talk about those examples, and there are many more and I'd love people to go to cathedralthinking.com and scan or read them. I also would encourage anyone who likes the concept of Cathedral Thinking to apply it to something they're doing, and then send it to our website. We would love to post it.

If someone decides to apply it to the restoration of maybe a dilapidated historic neighborhood in their community, that requires Cathedral Thinking. Frankly, the rebuilding in the devastated storm-ravaged states, people will come back to that with the short-term prerogatives because those are so important to get

people safely back into a workable setup for schools and employment and their sort of safe environment and deal with all of that, but as those communities rebuild, they're rebuilding for the long future in a way that they've not been able to do in the past because it's been increments of over a hundred years of a community's development, and all of a sudden it's there. When that is removed, they begin with a new master plan. They begin with, in some cases, not even a street grid that is still workable. As those design elements come in, they're not going to be put together for something that's workable just two years down the road. The civic leadership, the communities themselves, individual neighborhoods, as they build anew because in many cases it's not rebuilding, it is building anew, they're building new homes and communities that are for their as yet unborn grandchildren. They will, whether they think of Cathedral Thinking as a term or they simply think that, "We are doing today things that have to outlast us and outlast our own children we know about. They have to be for future generations," they will be applying Cathedral Thinking.

Yeah. I think that's a really great way to kind of bring this whole concept around and to really illustrate what it can do, especially relating to some of those events that have just recently happened here in the States, both in Houston and in Florida, and what those communities are going to need to do. I actually heard on another podcast recently, someone that's more in the hospitality talking from the hotels perspective, talking about how when Houston comes back, it's going to come back stronger, and that their hospitality industry has a tremendous opportunity. Not that that's not without challenge, what's in front of them right now, but they do have this really tremendous opportunity.

Well, and I think when one looks at after the tsunami in Thailand, how it was the hospitality industry that was sort of at the forefront of reviving the economy. When you look at some of the terrible things that have happened in say parts of India, it's often been the hospitality industry that is first back up on its feet as the wounded people, wounded spiritually, emotionally, as well as sometimes physically, are at the forefront of again becoming good hosts. We've seen this in places like Italy with devastating landslides, or in countries that don't have economies that can bounce back readily. But travel and tourism often are about foreign currencies going and doing good, creating employment and help in parts of the world that are recovering say from a war once there is

peace and travel again is relatively safe and the first people are going back. It can be a substantial help to the economy. So reconstruction tourism, as it would be termed, is certainly going to be something that will happen in Florida, and will happen in Texas and other places that have been hurt, because the hospitality industry by its very nature has to be one of the first ones back up on its feet after it's been knocked to its knees.

Yeah. That's really great. Great point.

Finding Creative Ways to Utilize Cathedral Thinking

I imagine in this reconstructing of tourism or engaging in Cathedral Thinking in some of these communities, or just anywhere, but kind of following this line of thinking right now, on this podcast we talk a lot about creativity and collaboration. You and I, our conversation has deviated a little bit from that, but creativity and collaboration I think are going to be so important in this rebuilding of these destinations. Do you have any thoughts on how creativity and collaboration might apply, or Cathedral Thinking, how they kind of work together?

Well, I think one of the things about creativity is that it sometimes just arrives. The person who is the receiver of it or who is channeling it, say a great idea that pops up for whatever, you can't always trace back what the inspiration was. But once an idea exists, once the creativity has begun, the only value in having a good idea is to eventually have it accepted by other people. In order to get your idea, your creative energy, to do good and to have your ideas accepted by other people, you need a process to take that idea through. Cathedral Thinking is so simple for people to understand. You can actually explain it in about 45 seconds, and people nod, "Oh yeah. If I was designing a cathedral, it was going to take 50 years to build. I wouldn't be around so I need to have a design that somebody else can finish, and that somebody else after them has to be able to finish it. I get it. Done." The stonemason story, done.

When creativity comes along and you have an idea, one of the early things to do with an idea is to give it a name. Then all of a sudden it exists, whether it's a notion of writing a book and you give it a working title. All of a sudden that's there and you're kind of excited about it. Maybe it's a new building. You give it a name or you give

it a sketch design. As you begin to shape your idea so that other people can understand it, it also becomes easier for you then to communicate that idea. Once you can communicate your idea, your creativity has a life. It has mobility. It has momentum. You can shape and you can guide that.



“The value in having a good idea is to have it accepted by other people.” – @inkroadsRick #Podcast

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If you’ve used the notion of, “We’re doing this today because here’s how it has to look in three weeks, here’s how it has to look in three years, and here’s what it’s going to be like in 30 years,” it’s easier for people to nod and get it. You know, if you’ve got a plan of something that you need to do, however far away, building a new home, if it’s going to be done in three years, you know where you have to be six months before it’s done, and you know where you have to be a year before it’s done. Pretty soon you realize that if you’re going to be where you need to be a year before that is completed, your idea comes to fruition, you know where you have to be in three months, which pretty much defines what you have to do today, because if you don’t do it today, you’re not going to be where you need to be in three months, let alone in three years. I think that that’s where Cathedral Thinking gives a way to channel creativity, make it into an idea, give it an application, and give it life with goals.

Yeah, I think that’s a great way to kind of illustrate and connect the dots between Cathedral Thinking and this whole idea of creativity, especially destination marketing, but of course any industry I think that would apply.

In any industry and any community. You know, about I'm going to say 25 years ago almost, I was in Australia watching on television about a big beach cleanup that they were doing in the Sydney Harbor. I returned to Vancouver in my role at Tourism Vancouver and realized that although we were a clean city, we could do a better job. Under the umbrella of tourism, we approached the city and the then city manager, and they co-shared with Tourism Vancouver and the City of Vancouver a program called Keep Vancouver Spectacular. The positioning of Vancouver has long been Vancouver: Spectacular By Nature, because of the gorgeous setting it's in, but you can't take that for granted, and tourism certainly can't take that element of its product for granted. The rationale was, "Let's do a spring cleanup as people do in their homes, but let's do it community-wide, and let's do it so that our place looks great for the coming visitors," because the visitor season was beginning.

It was a one-off event that happened 25 years ago, and this most recent May, the 25th Annual Keep Vancouver Spectacular community cleanup happened. The first year, and this was in a clean city, the city collected over the one-week period, an additional 90 tons of garbage because people went out to the local parks, they went on the pathways, they did their neighborhood cleanups, not just in front of their home. Buildings that long businesses that were street front, they'd long moaned that somebody else should be cleaning up the garbage. They went out and cleaned it up, and they did it with pride. Then at the end of the first year, they said, "Let's do this again next year." Now it continues. It wasn't begun with a 25-year view, but in retrospect, that notion, which was an Australian idea in genesis, we could say it had legs or we could say that it's now an example of Cathedral Thinking in retrospect.

Wow. That's really awesome. What is also really awesome about that story is where you get your ideas from. You were in Australia watching a news story, and that sparked this idea of something that you could do back home. It also reinforces this whole notion of how important travel is to personal development and growth and professional growth.

"Full Moon"

What I'd like to do is switch gears a little bit now and talk about your latest book, "Full Moon."

Thank you.

I would love to talk about your book and hear more about it. Listeners, it's **"Full Moon over Noah's Ark: An Odyssey to Mount Ararat and Beyond."** I've started digging in, and I actually just want to read on the jacket here what Peter Greenburg, travel editor of CBS News, has to say about it because this is actually exactly what I thought when I started reading it. He says, "It's not just about the journey or standard travel writing. It's about story-telling, and Rick takes us on a magical, almost mystical adventure to destinations once only shrouded in mythology." I think that really does sum up at least what I've read so far in the first hundred pages or so that I'm in. I'd like to know, Rick, why this book? Why this travel experience, if we could start there?

Well, when I was a little kid, there was a book on the shelf in our bedroom, along with I don't know, the Boy Scout book, and the Children's Classics or whatever. I must have been eight or nine. There was a book called The Forbidden Mountain, and it was about Mount Ararat in Eastern Turkey. At times, Mount Ararat has been within Armenia, at times sort of within Persia, then the Ottoman Empire. It's moved, but Mount Ararat's name association for many, many people is Noah's Ark, and the whole thought that were there a flood of, in that case, Biblical proportions, this is where the storied boat landed. Over the years, many people have gone looking for it.

Now, in the Quran, it lands on a different mountain, still within kind of the broad region of what today would be Turkey/Iraq zone in the East, and in some other writings, yet another mountain. But they hold with the concept of a world flood, which of course, if you live somewhere and had never been more than 30 miles either way, and you had a big flood, your world has flooded, your known world, the entire world that you could possibly conceive about. While that story was handed down verbally for maybe 2,000 years before it was written down, when it was first written down, it didn't have the name Noah. It had a totally different character. It had different circumstances, but still had angry gods, and a boat and survival, and people gathering their local animals and foodstuffs and so forth. When it began to be written down, it got modified over time and now is what we know.