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Some Observations On What One Person Can Do In Human Services

It is rather common to encounter in many people a sense of resignation about what they cannot do in human services and perhaps even some futility about trying in the first place. It is very hard to argue with them as they inevitably have had experiences that have left them discouraged and fearful. It also serves no purpose to deny these often appalling and devastating experiences. The truths that these moments can reveal about the harsher side of modern human services deserve to be aired and acknowledged as this will very much help reduce their further perpetuation. It also acts as a necessary and important element of the survival and continued fruitful work of good people in human service roles. Without good people of all kinds committed to a renewed and positive contribution in services we shall not see the kind of support offered that the users of human services seek. It is this overarching objective that makes it worthwhile to take great care with the question of ensuring that people be able to make the kinds of needed contributions they are capable of.

It would be incorrect to suggest that any contribution in human services is acceptable just because it is sincerely offered. To be of authentic service to another person suggests a standard of effectiveness and relevance that ought not to be diluted simply to accommodate the needs of the server to feel good about what they do. To do so would simply pander to the already pervasive self-congratulatory pieties that justify and disguise rather mediocre service practice. A better option would be to recognize that which is genuinely good and helpful in much of "ordinary" human service and be sure to encourage and protect it. This element is indeed limited in its own way and it surely does not make up for or justify all that human services are not but should be. Nevertheless, there is such a thing as worthwhile individual contributions in any number of service situations and it is this important and fundamental element of people helping people, which need whatever care and attention we can give it. Without this being present we will simply have the outward appearance of service without the life giving essence that comes when people contribute sincerely and well.

a) Common Discouragements To Individual Contributions

It is useful to note the many forces that might act to dampen or even prohibit the kind of authentic individual contributions that are frequently possible as it is often true that these may be partly or wholly reversible. It is also true that it is only reasonable to acknowledge these as being a continuing source of difficulty if their drawbacks are to be limited or overcome. The first of these is the growth in modern human services of the pervasiveness and power of technocratic culture. By this it is meant an emphasis on the primacy of technique, bureaucracy and systems over people. When the system and its

needs begins to prevail over the humanity and importance of the people served then we see that “service” is no longer the driving force or ethic. This is not merely a question of vested interests gaining the upper hand it is also a recognition of the way the ostensible “tools” of service i.e. organizations, systems, funds etc. have come to be more important than the tasks and values that created them.

It is also important to look at the size and scale of our modern service systems and agencies and recognize the role that size plays in making “small” people feel smaller and less important than they should. This is accentuated even more by the disempowerment of organizational hierarchies and the seeming remoteness of the governing elites of these from the lives and needs of the much more humble people who provide most services. There is an ever-present sense that the professionals and experts are the people with answers and that the role of ordinary people is to recognize this. The idea that there might be talents, abilities and a richness of valuable gifts in everyday people somehow seems less important than the presence of degrees, titles and other such bonafides of the professional classes. This environment can serve to create the unspoken message that many people are lacking the kinds of key personal resources needed in the process of assisting others.

The heart of the difficulty is that many people might succumb to such misleading impressions about their worth and value and therefore fail to see that they do have important things to give. It is quite understandable that people might gauge their own worth by relying on what they see valued “outside” themselves. This will potentially be at the cost of whatever their “inner” capacities might be since these seem not to matter to many organizations. This is even more the case where people are treated as disposable commodities. In fact, so called “ordinary” people may well possess crucial personal qualities that are essential to the process of effective service. These could include trust, judgment, intuition, perceptiveness, maturity, wisdom, commitment and any number of other essential gifts that are not so easily obtained simply by filling jobs with credentialed persons. In many important ways, having people involved in roles of service whom may both respect and care deeply about the people they assist is foundational to good service practice. Interestingly, it is the absence of these traits that so many clients of services complain about. So it is not a trivial matter whatsoever to place a great deal of importance on getting the people involved in roles of service whose personal aptitudes, values and commitments are “right” for the job to be done.

Even people well suited to their chosen work might be rendered ineffective by their own self-defeating perspectives. Unlike the discouragements that come from outside, the ones that come from within may more readily be ones that the person can change most directly with their own efforts. This remediation is not likely, however, where the person cannot see these as being detrimental. Most people struggle with some degree or another of self-defeating behavior and attitudes. It is common that this is accompanied by a lack of appreciation and awareness by the person of the feasibility of other ways of proceeding. This link between one’s personal outlook and the contribution

that will or will not manifest itself is an important one as it can very much limit what people prove to be capable of. Equally, in a positive sense, it is useful to see personal attitude as an intrinsic catalyst of personal gifts that might otherwise lie dormant and thus unavailable for useful service to others.

b) Considerations That Underlie The Value Of Personal Contributions

It is important to consider the critical question of whether so-called “small” acts of service lack importance. There is a tendency to equate importance with bigness and thus many people believe that it is only large-scale activities that will make for significant and consequential results. This view gives greater impetus to rely on strategies, approaches and systems that are in themselves big. These may have their place, but the exclusivity of this inclination leaves other ways to make a difference seem valid but somehow not incisive. After all, the argument goes, single or small acts only are a “drop in the bucket”. This viewpoint misses out on a pivotal issue. This is whether the act is inherently what is actually most needed by people. If it is, then the amount of it is only a limitation rather than a source of invalidity. It may be a “drop in the sea” but the drop that was most in need and which does good thereby. Its importance is in its relevance to the needs of people not its size or impact. It may be that saving one life still leaves many lives still to be saved. However, if it is your life that is saved it may help clarify the worth of “small” acts.

It is also true that the “right” act is often much more valuable than many other acts that lack pertinence to the problem at hand. It is certainly evident that what people may most fundamentally need is not what is offered them by many services and organizations. Thus the challenge is always to act towards others in a way that speaks to their actual needs rather than relying on habit, procedures and other forms of expedience. If not, it is predictable that it will not be the needs of people that ultimately defines what gets done but rather the needs and priorities of other parties and interests. This process of selecting the “right” things for decision and priority occurs in countless ways every day. It underlies the very “human” basis of services. What people are really like will shape what will happen or not. Hidden in this endless process of reflection and action are the ingredients of quality that each person brings or doesn’t to the task at hand. These elements cannot be captured easily by job descriptions, organizational plans, and other such standbys of the technocratic culture of organizations because they arise from the unique identity and expressions of each person involved. Yet it is these qualities that will matter most in each of these moments. Beneficial service to others is not assured unless the human beings involved are effective not just present.

If the importance of people in their “smallness” is not appreciated in regards to the quality of service then it will fall to “non-people” factors to become the basis of service. These might include abstract ideologies, prescribed methodologies, standardized procedures, the expenditure of money and any number of other formalisms that are seen as a safeguard against the inescapable ambiguity of human variability and performance.

These will miss the point as “human” service must, and will ultimately be a product of people, what they are like and what they choose or do not choose to make of themselves. Thus it is worthwhile to search out the things that make it possible for people to see what it is that is needed by others and to see what role they can play in responding to this. The discovery of the answers to these kinds of questions is at the core of people being able to make the individual contributions they are capable of.

c) The Many Gifts of People And The Good They Can Do

It is always instructive to reflect on how much it matters that a particular person was present in a situation in terms of what flowed from those moments. The kinds of qualities they bring may be priceless in their own way in terms of the good that occurs. It may not even matter whether the person is particularly conscious of their talents or capacities, as the value of these may be present in either case. A kind word or a key insight when these are most needed can make all the difference because this is what is “most right” and fundamental to achieving good outcomes. Such gifts may save lives, mend hearts, give hope, avoid tragedy, enlighten, reduce despair, and many other beneficial results simply because the right person was present. Equally, all of these might be lost if the person involved is not suited to the task. Such qualities are not merely desirable to have as they may prove to be essential.

This is why it is so important to see the link between the good that people are capable of and their own view of themselves. If the person is not willing to recognize their potential to be of service to others it could well be that much that is possible will remain hidden and undeveloped. There is no “fixed” amount of good that one can do in any case and the openness to what might be possible then sets the stage for what could someday be. Much of this cannot occur as easily when people are not in the situations where they can feel and see what it is that is needed. The desire to serve often arises not from what it is that the person would like to do so much as it comes with the recognition that what they have to offer may be needed and welcomed. It is a very common occurrence that people find themselves undertaking and enjoying any number of roles of service that they would never have previously thought likely. The good that any of us can do is not always straightforwardly evident and being ready to be surprised by what this might be is a very helpful attitude to take.

The variety of gifts and “callings” that people may show can vary widely as will the places these are needed and the ways they might express themselves. In many people the satisfactions they gain from finding where their gifts are most needed and fruitful is unlike other satisfactions in life. This is because the exercise of these gifts of service goes deep to the heart of who they are and the meaning of their lives. It is quite incorrect to assume that anybody can fruitfully take on any role in human service simply because they are trained or authorized to do it. It is all too clear that people attempting to serve others in ways that are not consistent with their gifts and “calling” can not only lead to inadequate service it may be destructive to both the person attempting to serve and those

served. Equally, there is a kind of naturalness, beauty and harmony that is present when one sees people who are doing what they were born to do. They make many things look so much easier than they might be for others because it is genuinely who they are at the deepest levels. Finding, nurturing and applying this capacity in us correctly is at the heart of good service.

d) Some Basic Questions That Shape Personal Contributions

It is beside the point to explore the scope of one's potential contribution if, in the first place, it has not been resolved that making a contribution is a personal goal and priority. This question must first be resolved as it lays the basis for the many subsequent personal choices that might arise. It is very difficult to do many of the "right" things if this purpose is not clearly anchored in the personal decisions that guide one's life. This is most readily seen in the many acts of service that involve some measure of self-denial or sacrifice so that the needs of others might occupy one's attention. It is not likely that much of this service could ever happen if there were not some acceptance of this personal "cost" of these roles of service. On the other hand, where there is the will and resolution to make a contribution then these are seen as being an intrinsic element of getting things done.

More difficult for many individuals is coming to both a sense of what it is that one has to give and the value of this to others. Nevertheless, it is this contribution that is the essence of one's personal legacy in being of service. Yet it cannot be assumed that the answer to what this is somehow obvious and clear. More likely it is something that eludes easy definition and may vary over a lifetime. For this reason it may be a concern or question that needs to be posed periodically in the context of the other directions and responsibilities in one's life. The advantage of bringing this into focus is that it is usually linked to what does or does not ultimately inspire and motivate a person. Such motivation is not a trivial matter as it provides the energy, enthusiasm and staying power required of many roles of service. Making a contribution simply does not happen where the person does not believe in the worth of what they have to offer and relies on this to be an enduring source of the desire to serve.

If people are in touch with themselves and clear about the kind of "niche" that most suits them, then the task usually shifts to fashioning the kinds of opportunities that would be most helpful to realizing one's vision and potential. Making a contribution is very much linked to the requisite task of creating the context in which this can happen. This may be the "right" kind of role or perhaps the "right" emphasis within an established role(s). In many cases this will have to be sought out or specially developed since the vision of particular people may not readily fit into the status quo. Nevertheless, if the faith and conviction is present about what it is that is one's "calling" it is much easier to sustain oneself until favorable conditions exist for the fulfillment of one's ideal in regards to service.

Even when conditions are supportive it is still worth considering the implications of what it may take to sustain and renew oneself in various roles of service. The flatness, depletion and possibly discouragements that lead to a need for renewal have many sources. It is useful to see the problem of renewal as actually being a problem of needing various renewals. Each cause may have its own distinct origin and particular remedy. What takes it out of one person may not be so with another, so consequently, the need for renewal will reflect individual temperaments in how it expresses itself and how it is resolved. The character of the frustrations, challenges and rewards of the specific type of service being attempted will produce commensurate effects on the people involved. How the person manages these effects will have much to do with how well they carry themselves over time in these roles. If a person is not willing to take responsibility for maintaining their own well being it cannot be expected that others will do this for them.

It is also true that all people have and must cope with any number of personal limitations. These can be damaging if they are exceeded. However, they needn't pose an inordinate difficulty if the person genuinely accepts them as being part of who they are and makes allowances for them. It is both possible and desirable to see limitations not as fatal weaknesses but simply part of what it means to be human. Keeping a positive view of what one has to give can also help to balance the inevitable negative feelings that arise about what one has not been able to achieve. It is useful to be able to enjoy and celebrate what has been able to happen and to take the time to remind oneself of what still might be possible. Feeling the need to get motivated again and again is simply part of being able to remain constructive and creative and is not, in itself, a sign of anything more than a natural cycle of highs and lows.

A key element of many roles of service is not so much a question of what one does "vis a vis" oneself, as it is how one gets along with the many others who may also be part of the process of service. It is always a challenge to get the best out of oneself and it is no less challenging to do this with others. The considerations involved are similar and it begins with recognizing the good in others enabling that to show itself. Simply acknowledging them as useful and valuable can reinforce many worthwhile traits in people. It can also be good to do this as a counterweight to the temptation to overly focus on the shortcomings of others. Many collective or shared contributions of this kind require a willingness to work with others in ways that suit the group overall. This means an acceptance of the fact of compromise and the need to bear with the preferences of others. If one is too inflexible in this regard it is much less likely that group or team efforts will prove to be the best way to make a contribution. Again, it is important to "know thyself".

e) The Nurturing of the Good in People

It is an important point to note that people are not "fixed" for all time and it is often possible to influence them for the better. In reality, the interdependence and

interconnectedness of people to each other and to the environment more generally has been appreciated by peoples and cultures for eons. Our own western culture has created a worldview that sees people as much more separate and individualized than interrelated and this has tended to diminish our insights in to how we interact to influence each other. In any case, if there is to be the nurturing of the good contributions of people it is useful to have in mind what this would normally take.

It begins with seeing that all of our acts and even our thoughts do have significance on both others and us even if this effect is “small”. This recognition leads to the very sensible question of whether we wish to take responsibility for this influence and thereby commit to its use for hopefully good results. If we can see that we do have influence then we are no longer hostages to the idea that all is set and unchangeable. We can try to use our influence, however modest it may be, for constructive ends. Setting in place an ideal of this kind is very important as it orients us both consciously and unconsciously to a view of ourselves as a channel through which good things can come. It also forces us to reflect on the good qualities we may possess when it comes to influencing others. These could be as diverse as humor, kindness, intelligence, compassion, persuasiveness, attentiveness to others, purity of intent or motivation, appreciation of others etc. It is these that must be constructively mobilized if progress is to be made.

This commitment to use whatever gifts one has to nurture the contribution of others is fundamental but is only the beginning. It is important that our personal capacity be created and strengthened so that it becomes easier to search for and see the good in people. This suggestion may seem a bit “pollyana” but it is nonetheless important. The intention here is not to see things that are not there ie to wish for desirable qualities. It is to uncover what may be present but in a dormant, weakened or diminished form. The “hiddenness” of many people’s capacities is only evident after that which has been concealed has shown itself. Not uncommonly, these talents or proclivities had escaped the notice, not only of others, but also of the persons themselves. This neglect may be due to any number of factors, not the least of which is that there has been no value placed on many traits. Also, these traits may have been used for purposes that were unhelpful. We have all heard the lament “if only he/she had used their talents for good rather than ill”.

Talents and abilities do not exist in a vacuum. They usually need a context in order to come into play. This context can be pursued and created if the will exists to see people develop. Without there being a situation where talents can be used for good then there often is no reason for these to be expressed. It is useful to consider whether the person has ever been asked to contribute. Having one’s abilities noticed and valued can be a motivating influence and often, by itself, can be a catalyst of people. Creating such opportunities is not particularly easy but it does move the question from being an abstract one to becoming a practical experiment and exploration. Such moments of encouraging the novice expression of latent gifts can contain risks but many of these can be coped

with through prudent precautions and gradual approaches. Talents often first appear as “gems in the rough” and it takes forbearance and patience to await their eventual “polished” form as this talent matures.

It is not unusual that the vision for the potential fruition of talents does not begin with the person as this may be easier for others more familiar with a field or specialty to see how untapped resources in people could conceivably be applied. At the same time this does not preclude a simultaneous process that involves the person in some sort of reflection about their potentials and limits and how these apply to a field such as human service. Many ideas will not have occurred to such a person but that does not mean that a “pull” or “draw” in particular directions has not already manifested in the life of the person. For many people these impulses are inexplicable because they seem so out of place. Again, many innate capacities simply don’t fit a specific pattern and timing in life and cannot therefore show themselves because they seem irrelevant to the concerns at the time. This is why it is useful to see a link between the gifts of people and the contexts in which these abilities or traits might bear fruit.

It is also useful to better appreciate this implied process of assisting people to discover and utilize their talents constructively. People often manifest extraordinary talent without much preparation and notice but this is clearly exceptional. The more normal case is that whatever native talent exists “builds” with use and cultivation. This implies a “drawing out” process whereby the underdeveloped capacity is reinforced, refined and strengthened. Much has been said and written about “learning curves” but it is essential to recognize the ways in which this learning can occur and how the development process can be aided. Without the nurturing and the disciplines associated with it then it is quite possible that the talent may not manifest to the degree that would otherwise be possible.

It is very easy when concentrating on one’s vision of the possibilities of others to be carried away by that prospect and unwittingly forget the needs of the person who embodies those prospects. People are more than their talents and the task of supporting them to make a contribution are immeasurably helped by a willingness to try to understand who they are and what their goals and values are. It is, after all, their life and people generally appreciate that their autonomy and wishes count whatever the good intentions of the ally. For this reason it is highly desirable if the person is part of the process of creating a future (for themselves) that involves the good use of their abilities. This does not prohibit the challenging of people to do better but it does nonetheless require a commitment to work with people not “on” or “at” them. This is more than a matter of their dignity as it speaks to the necessary voluntary basis of freedom and choice. Coercion, even for laudable ends, is not the way to bring out the best in people.

This brings us to the inevitable challenges associated with finding the motivational basis that might mobilize a person to give of themselves for others. It is

usually true that motivation is complex and multi-dimensional and thus it is to be expected that it will rarely be a single motive at work but rather various motives; many elements of which may be somewhat in conflict with others. It is also true; therefore, that it is useful to seek several reinforcing sources of motivation that together will give the person the necessary impetus. In this it would be incorrect to believe that people always do things for “rational” reasons, as this may not be true. While people can be calculating and are said to act in their own best and allegedly selfish interests this is not a given at all. What is often more true than such a view allows is that people do have “pro-social” motives including cooperation, inspiration, altruism, concern for morality, concern for people, love, kindness and so forth. If one is not looking for these it is hard to have them come into play. Even if other countervailing impulses are at work it may well be these sorts of more benign promptings that hold sway. While a change of heart is not easily obtained it does occur with great frequency and thus there should be some openness to it.

Lastly, there is no substitute for authentic satisfaction as both a consciousness raiser and motivator. Seeing the work of one’s own hand lead to good is not just a nice feeling, it may well be the catalyst for deep personal changes. Being part of good things happening is not beneficial merely because another person benefits. It may well do the helper a lot of good for they themselves to be better than might otherwise have been the case. In this sense doing good for others is really about doing something with oneself. It begins with why we live the life we do and the values and choices that this entails. We can make a contribution each day of our lives that adds something worthwhile to our world but we must first decide that this is how we shall live. It may be surprising to many but each day provides an opportunity for us to change our minds and thus our lives. If part of our personal ideal is to be of service we shall not lack for opportunity.

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