



“Let’s Use A Good Plate”

Practical Wisdom in the Quest for Valued Social Roles

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*He who would do Good to another must
do it in Minute Particulars... for
Art and Science cannot exist but
in Minutely Organized Particulars.*

–William Blake (1820)

*This story could not be told if Marietta had not lived it and agreed to share it. The events would not be there to reflect on if Hope Leet Dittmeier and Whitney Kays of Realizations in Louisville had not created them in company with Marietta. I would not have heard Hope tell the story if the Kentucky Council on Developmental Disabilities has not funded the ROLES Initiative to promote learning about promoting valued social roles. I am very grateful for all this action; without it I would have nothing to reflect on.

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Marietta enjoys good quality supports. She has a self-directed individual budget. She shares her own apartment with a roommate who does not receive services. She has had and lost a supported job and is looking for another. She and her aunt, who is her legal guardian, have chosen to collaborate with Realizations, a small organization committed to developing and delivering personalized assistance. She and her guardian are in control of who shares her apartment and who belongs to the small team of assistants recruited by Realizations to meet the specifications set in the support plan that she and those who know her best have made. The assistance she receives has met the goal set by her guardian: Marietta is safe and in a positive, stable situation, in marked contrast to the series of failed “placements”, including a period of homelessness, that disrupted her adult life before she hired Realizations. On many current accounts of good quality, her assistance scores high on the curve. She has her own budget (along with about 3.6% of her fellow Medicaid HCBS waiver participants in the US) and her own home (along with about 30% of HACBS recipients in the US). Marietta and her guardian are in control, and, overall, both women are satisfied with how things are going.

Realizations, however, is driven by an understanding of quality that takes these conditions for granted. It knows no other way to serve people. Being in control of your budget and what it buys, living in your own place and pursuing what is important to you with assistance from people you choose, and adapting assistance to the ups and downs of life only begin the journey. Consistently providing these basic conditions is very hard work, but the real evidence of quality lies beyond these offerings in a quest for the good things in life. For Realizations, this quest is informed by rigorous study of Social Role Valorization (SRV) (Wolfensberger, 1998; Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007), which teaches that the good things in life are most likely to come to those who occupy valued social roles. Promoting valued social roles involves positively affecting the way a person is seen and interpreted and assuring competence sufficient to the role.

It is fair to say that Marietta and her aunt did not choose Realizations because of its systematic commitment to SRV. They chose

a person –Hope, the founder of Realizations– who was willing to work with them when other service providers had given up, who invested time in listening carefully, discovering what mattered to them and problem solving with them rather than presenting pre-packaged answers, and who made and delivered on agreements in a way that earned their trust. It is also fair to say that each of the steps that Hope took in making and fulfilling each of her agreements with Marietta are shaped by her commitment to increase her organization’s ability to promote valued social roles for the people who allow Realizations to assist them.

This opens an important perspective on quality as a judgement about the way people act in relationship. From this point of view, quality is good when people are doing things that increase their desire and ability to approach what they understand as a good life, an understanding that improves as their capacity develops. This is near enough Aristotle’s discussion of practical wisdom (phronesis) (2002), to make it a useful label for the kind of intelligence that must inform the minute particulars of the relationship between Marietta and her assistants if her life is to be good. One helpful result of associating with Aristotle’s understanding of practical wisdom is that it draws a distinction between knowing in theory and doing in a way that embodies a good decision about the best next move toward a good life. Practical wisdom is not a matter of conforming to a regulation or finding the answer on a web page, it is a matter of taking account of what’s desired and what’s there and creating an effective move in the moment. A move is effective when it increases understanding, desire, and ability to get closer to a good life.

For Realizations, SRV is a good theory. It argues for a way to the good things in life –occupy valued social roles – and articulates multiple dimensions for assistants to consider. Like any theory, the difference it makes to Marietta depends on how it informs the minute particulars of her life, the practical wisdom that she and her assistants bring to bear in the stream of big and small decisions that take people through their daily life.

Conscious intention to set a stage upon which Marietta might explore valued social roles informed the way Hope carried out her

initial agreements to help Marietta find an affordable apartment and assemble a support team. Hope's understanding of choice and control makes it more complex than simply doing what the person or guardian says. Her experience and study frames what she hears and adds interpretation that makes her an active negotiator, not simply an instrument taking dictation from the individual budget holder. Safety and stability is Marietta's guardian's overwhelming concern. The idea of Marietta living in her own apartment with support is Hope's condition for agreeing to work for Marietta and her guardian. The choice of an older family friend as Marietta's initial roommate is one of the guardian's conditions for agreeing to the apartment. As Realizations continues to stick with Marietta and follow through on more and more of the agreements between family members and staff, trust grows, and Marietta develops her roles and relationships.

Hope understands Marietta's history of "failed placements" as, in part, a cause and consequence of a lack of valued roles and relationships outside her family. To improve the chances of stability, Hope explores until she finds a place that is both affordable and sociable. Hope searches through her personal network by asking around. Whitney, a Realizations staff member who will become Marietta's service coordinator, has just the place. Whitney lives in an affordable complex in a good location where there are people of Marietta's age, families with young children, common gathering and play areas, and traditions of neighborly association: friendly exchanges, monthly potluck dinners, occasional shared grill-outs, holiday parties, an annual Chili Cook-Off and Bonfire.

When a staff team is in place, Marietta and her roommate move in. Based on her own occasional but friendly interactions with people in the complex, Hope assumes that one valued role, that of neighbor, will soon be Marietta's and turns her attention to finding other possibilities for Marietta to contribute to her community. Within a month, she has tested her assumption about the neighbor role and discovered she was mistaken. Marietta has not met anyone.

This moment of disconfirmation might easily have passed into oblivion. Hope might have simply filed it in her mind with news of

the day; she might have seen it as an artifact of moving in that will take care of itself with the passage of time; she might have taken it theoretically as a sad commentary on the lack of real neighborliness in an alienated society or the presence of prejudice against people with developmental disabilities or African-Americans; she might have defined it as Marietta's choice, a matter of preference and personality and none of a staff person's business. This would have been a failure of practical wisdom in that it would have discounted the importance of the role of neighbor in a good life. (As Robert Putnam's research (2001) has pointed out, disproportionately large social and health benefits accumulate over time from small neighborly acts.)

What Hope did instead of letting the moment pass was to frame an inquiry about know how, "Do you know what to do to meet people?" Marietta's answer, "No", opened a new opportunity for mutual learning. Marietta learned what it would look like to be friendly to her neighbors, the posture, the words to say, when to offer to shake hands. Hope learned what it takes to assist Marietta to try a new social approach, detailed coaching and repeated practice.

Hope also gained a better understanding of Marietta's impairments, which she passed on as Whitney assumed responsibility for coordinating the support team. Marietta learns quickly and enthusiastically in response to coaching, but for her next steps don't come naturally. Meeting a mother and her new baby on a walk around the complex provides a rich opportunity for a moment of connection, but without coaching Marietta did not know what to say and just passed by ("What a precious baby," seems to fit local expectations and reliably lead to smiles all around.) Each moment shows how mindful, assertive, and fine grained assistance needs to be in order for Marietta to have the satisfactions of being a friendly neighbor. (This understanding of Marietta's particular constellation of impairments recalls an insight from the first text on the quality of support in English, written by Edward Seguin in 1866. Seguin saw that, for some people, impairments of will play a much larger role in their role performance difficulties than cognitive impairments do and noted that supporting the will was as

important as assisting the body or teaching the mind. Given how quickly she responds to well focused coaching from someone she trusts, this may help Marietta's assistants understand how to support her without getting entangled in negative attributions about laziness or lack of motivation as a character defect.)

Practical wisdom always has an ethical dimension because it concerns judgements of what will lead toward a good life. This often involves noticing and climbing outside a common understanding. One often unstated assumption that has grown influential in some organizations is that a good life would be one in which the people around you did not comment on what you don't seem to know how to do and don't try to teach you anything. To be sure, people with developmental disabilities have too often had their time wasted by bossy staff who feel obliged to put them through the paces defined by professionals who wrote behavioral objectives in a plan of care. But at least some people, Marietta for one, would miss out on small but satisfying social exchanges with her neighbors without people in her life who have earned sufficient trust to comment and actively coach. As Jim Mansell and his colleagues have amply documented, reticence to actively engage a person with an intellectual disability in an active and meaningful learning relationship is much more often a form of neglect than an instance of respect (Stancliffe, Jones, Mansell, & Lowe, 2008).

Of course it is possible to imagine a happily introverted person who wants nothing less than to act neighborly, and would experience being coached to smile at babies as impertinence if not a form of torment. However, to imagine such a person would not, in fact, be to think of Marietta when she has people she trusts engaging, coaching, and practicing with her. That it might not occur to Marietta to ask for assistance with taking up the valued role of neighbor is better understood as a sign of her vulnerability to being locked into isolation by her impairments than as a self-determined choice to be aloof. Knowledge of the minute particulars of individual lives are the medium of good quality and the ethical questions that arise from the unequal power in relationships with staff never go away.

This is far from a situation in which all-knowing staff shape positive outcomes that mobilize natural support. It is a matter of people increasing their practical wisdom by learning together through action and reflection. While coaching and practice usually work well to introduce Marietta to new things and invoke the confidence to try them, what hasn't been foreseen can frustrate the overall purpose. A barbecue shared on the lawn behind apartment buildings offers a great chance to be with the neighbors, but not if you simply get your food without speaking and withdraw to eat with your roommate, who is sitting at a distance from the rest of the group. In social situations, other's responses are definitive. Baking two kinds of cookies, putting them on styrofoam plates, wrapping them with a bow and a note and delivering them to the people who live in the other three apartments on your hall could have been the start of something bigger in the way of neighboring. The immediate result was smaller than Whitney expected and Marietta might have enjoyed –two thank-you notes and friendlier occasional 'Hi's. An effort (by assistants who do not knit) to build Marietta's interest in knitting into an informal knitting group by encouraging Marietta to knit in the common room fizzled. Asked what they had failed to understand about knitting groups, a friend pointed out that she and her fellow knitters don't knit much in summer, they gather in winter. The price of practical wisdom is a willingness to take responsibility for learning from what hasn't worked by avoiding blame and asking practical questions like "What have we missed, what don't we understand?" The knowledge that comes from this sort of inquiry is not a general theory but a better understanding of options for action with a particular person in a specific situation.

Practical wisdom also calls for reflection on what it is good to work on. Setbacks and small disappointments might have led to the conclusion that good neighbor is an obsolete role or a role for which the local demand is too small to matter to Marietta. Though difficulties at work led to the loss of a work role (she is still looking for another job), new people in her life assisted Marietta to successfully join the University of Louisville Black Diamond Choir, a role that offers many new relationships and experiences. Reflection showed that even as exciting a role as choir member didn't

need to eclipse or compete with continuing to be a friendly neighbor.

Taking time out to think about Marietta's life led Whitney to sharpen her sense of important next steps. Reflection led to an intentional focus on building one stronger relationship, and delivering more cookies.

Marietta likes to use the telephone to get information she is interested in. Tia, who worked for a time in the apartment complex office and lives in a nearby apartment, is one of the people Marietta frequently called at the office. Whitney knows Tia, and when Tia had a baby, she and Marietta decided to bake some cookies for Tia and her family (plain sugar cookies, because Tia is very particular about what her family eats). Because reciprocity and repeat encounters are important in building friendship they decided to use one of Marietta's good plates, with her name and number stuck to the bottom. This guaranteed at least one follow-up conversation when the plate came back.

"Let's use a good plate." A minute particular indeed, and so a good example of practical wisdom in a support relationship. Adding an extra measure of intentional civility to presentation of the gift pays honor to the specialness of new birth. Custom makes it almost certain that the plate comes back with thanks, and a likely occasion to admire the baby while sitting and visiting for a minute or two. Knowledge of what, specifically, would give Marietta' a chance to be a graceful participant in this small occasion informed preparation. So far, what comes naturally to most people in social encounters is most likely to come to Marietta when she and her assistants think the encounter through and practice her moves. When well prepared, Marietta is usually engaged and enthusiastic about her encounters with neighbors. But unless her assistant helps her to prepare and intentionally makes space for her, Marietta is very likely to disappear from her neighborhood's social life.

As Whitney thought more deeply about Marietta's roles and relationships, she saw the possibility that Tia could be a good friend to Marietta. Whitney also decided that the most direct way to that possibility was for Whitney to ask Tia to consider putting

a measure of extra effort into building up the friendship from her side. This kind of conversation is not so well defined a custom as sending out the good plate and getting it back. Whitney felt a bit awkward and concerned that Tia, with a toddler and a new baby, would find a polite way to refuse, so she scripted and practiced the way she would open the conversation. Adding thoughtfulness to the request worked. Tia said yes, and she and Marietta have strengthened their friendship. It's a bit sad that Tia and her family will be moving far away at the end of the year, but the friendship has meaning for both women.

Marietta's life has had much more going on than the single stream of neighboring that has illustrated quality as a judgement about the growth of practical wisdom in a support relationship. As Marietta has increased her presence as a neighbor many bigger things have gone on. She has been on road trips with the Black Diamond Choir. She has a different roommate, Zanetta, who brings great energy and access to new worlds. Whitney has had a baby of her own, remains Marietta's Service coordinator, and coaches Zanetta and Marietta's staff team to keep up a mindful approach to strengthening and extending her roles and relationships. Anticipation, coaching, and practice remain important. Whitney believes it is not too soon to be thinking about the how Marietta can make the best of the apartment complex's annual Chili Cook-Off and Bonfire, not just as a meal, but as a chance to show up as a good neighbor.

Despite much progress, loneliness remains the problem most widely reported among recipients of Medicaid funded service (Stancliffe, Lakin, Taub. Chiri, and Byun, 2009). Making progress on loneliness is easier when the assistance people require is under their control and delivered in an individualized way. But this will not be enough for a number of people. They will only find their way into satisfying relationships when practical wisdom informs their everyday thinking and the everyday thinking of the people who assist them. This cannot be done by assistants who are treated as interchangeable parts required to carry out routine tasks. Marietta's experience makes it clear that infusion of practical wisdom calls for relationships of trust with people whose

sense of direction is clear, who have time and resources for thinking their work through in a critical way, who have reason to care about the person they support as capable of taking up valued social roles, who are curious about the customs and ties that bring people together and creative in adapting them. Supporting the presence of such people in the lives of people who are at risk of exclusion and loneliness is the core mission of any competent service. Given the involvement of ordinary humans, these relationships will not deliver anything approximating perfection, but overall they will move toward the good things in life.

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