

WHY IMAGINATION MATTERS

**Pete Ritchie –
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Why does change happen so slowly?

Why did we spend the extra community care money doubling the number of people in nursing homes in Scotland, when we know that 80% of the people admitted to nursing home wanted to stay at home? Why do we still have so much segregated education? Why are we admitting more young people than ever to psychiatric hospital and prescribing ever more drugs for depression? Why are so few disabled people in paid employment? Why do we have so many projects and so little progress?

We know the simple explanations. There is not enough money. The government is not committed. We need more joint working between agencies. We need more staff training. We need to publicise good practice better. But even where these things are true, they are the symptoms, not the real causes. To find the real causes we have to go deeper.

We have to find the source code for keeping things the way they are. And then we have to see if we can change it.

By source code I mean the ways of thinking, the ways of talking and the ways of doing things which produce and maintain the status quo. These ways of thinking and talking and doing are embedded in our language and our habits and our organisations. They copy themselves without us noticing. They are passed on in conversation, in the media, in professional training, not as part of some powerful conspiracy but because they are good at getting themselves copied. They are like the genes of society.

Genes are instructions written in chemicals within the cells of every living thing on earth. They are instructions for reproducing individual organisms – whether a fly, a carrot or a sheep – and along the way for reproducing themselves. The successful genes are the ones which are carried in successful organisms. So far, the genes for bacteria are winning.

There are no such clear instructions within society for reproducing itself. But some people have started to use the word 'meme' to describe these genes of society. Memes get passed on through our culture and our language, not our bodies. Think of a meme as an element of culture which is passed on through imitation – dressing up as Father Christmas, racial prejudice, throwing coins into water, boy bands, charity shops, Mexican waves.

Some of these memes are so widespread that they disappear into the background. For example, it is hard to imagine a world without money – but money is a relatively recent meme.

The meme I want to focus on is believing that the world is divided into two groups of people – them and us. Different rules apply to them, they are made differently. They feel things differently. Any characteristic will do for separating them from us – religion, gender, ethnic origin, age, impairment or even postcode.

Once we have made this separation, the problem becomes focused on them. No longer is it a whole society problem – such as 'what would help us be more tolerant' or 'how could society be more inclusive'.

It becomes a problem of biology, a problem of genetics. We spend millions of pounds on research into how people with schizophrenia have different genes and different brains. But more people with schizophrenia get better in some of the poorest parts of the world than in Scotland. Why? Because there is less social stigma and more opportunities for part-time work.

It becomes a 'how do we deal with them' problem. A 'wouldn't we be better off without them' problem. And when 'we' are much more powerful than 'them' it is our ways of thinking and our ways of speaking and our ways of doing which come to dominate. We are working on the wrong brick, but we keep doing it.

This way of thinking dominates our service system. It generates the language of 'client groups' and 'special needs'. This language then becomes a further barrier to seeing and talking about people clearly. We find it harder to recognise people's common humanity and their universal needs. How else would we need to re-discover at the start of the 21st century that some people value having friends, want a decent place to live and need to be treated with respect? Did we think they were Pokemon?

And once we have the language of special needs in place, this way of speaking underpins a way of doing things. If we define people as having special needs, they must need special laws which apply only to them, special people to diagnose their needs, and special buildings

where these needs can be 'catered for'. And once these structures are in place, a whole industry of vested interests ensures they are hard to dismantle.

This way of thinking about them and us makes itself so comfortable in our heads that we are not aware of it. It becomes the frame of the window through which we see the world. Families start to ask for a 'multidisciplinary assessment'. People organise themselves in advocacy groups to get better services for their particular group. The disability movement campaigns for disability legislation. Good people raise money for special buses for 'the disabled' or 'the elderly'.

People's impairment, or their age or their ethnic origin is part of who they are, but only part. It is just one of their identities. Someone who is a wheelchair user, or black, or in her sixties or all three may also be a mother, a sailor, a Glaswegian, a musician, a teacher, a union member, a daughter, a frequent flyer and a great person to have at a party.

But our way of thinking and talking makes an impairment into the person's principal identity – the first and main thing we need to know about them. Often we tell people about a child's impairment before we tell them the child's name. We don't say "my son is Joe". We say "my son is profoundly disabled". For people who might want to know Joe, this is a hard wall to get over.

Dividing the world in our heads into two groups – disabled and non-disabled, old and not old – is at the heart of the problem. It leads us to think that people in the same group are like each other and unlike the people in the other group.

But when we try to think differently, we lose our fluency and we struggle to use a less familiar set of concepts and speak a less familiar language. What are the concepts we need to go beyond us and them?

We need the concept of universality – the concept that some things hold for all of us, whatever our age, whatever our ethnic origins, whatever our impairments. Nearby we need the concept of citizenship – that citizenship is enough to bring entitlement to common decency and fair treatment.

We need the concepts of diversity and uniqueness – that all of us and not just some of us are different, and that difference is something to be treasured.

We need the concept of wholeness – that all of us are whole but none of us is perfect.

We need the concept of fairness – so we can see that treating people fairly does not mean treating them the same.

We need the concepts of oppression, exploitation and abuse so we can see when power is being wrongly used, and we need the concepts of protection and safeguarding so we can see when it is being used well.

So what would be the ways of doing that would follow on from this way of thinking and talking? First of all, our laws would be generic. They would apply to contexts and situations, not to categories of people. For example, the 'Responsibility and Protection' Act would replace the Mental Health Act and the Adults with Incapacity Act and provide a general framework for making decisions on behalf of someone else.

The Community Care Act would be replaced by a Common Decency Act which entitles people to personal and practical assistance so they can get on with everyday life.

The antidiscrimination legislation would be wrapped up into a Fair Treatment and Equal Access Act which places a duty on employers and service providers and others to treat people fairly and make their services accessible to all. We would abandon the idea of retirement.

Support services would be generic, available to families and individuals of any age who need day to day help. Instead of a plethora of 'specialist' agencies competing for 'specialist' clients, people who need personal and practical assistance would get this from a generic agency based in the neighbourhood – an agency which allows them to choose and direct the person who supports them, or to take the cash and make their own arrangements if they want.

Strategies for change

Moving in this direction requires two strategies – a strategy for service reform and a strategy for social change.

I want to say something first about four approaches to service reform. Like the layers of an onion, these approaches go successively deeper.

The first is 'copy good practice'. Careless copying loses the quality of the original. If we want to copy good practice, we should be careful not just to copy the product. We have to unpack the product and find the instructions for making it so we can make it again.

For example, it is good to have Carl Poll from Keyring here today. Keyring is a great organisation. It provides affordable, sustainable and effective support for networks of 9-10 people living in their own houses within a neighbourhood. We are delighted that start-up funding has now been agreed for a sister organisation in Scotland called Neighbourhood

Networks. Keyring is well worth copying. But the most important thing about Keyring is not the product but the ideas for making the product – the focus on neighbourhoods, the emphasis on self-help and contribution, the idea of voluntary membership. If we understand the ideas we can adapt the product, repair it when things are going wrong and generate other products which can work well in other contexts.

The second approach is changing the theory in use. Moving towards inclusive services means changing our design assumptions.

For example, it means moving from 'special and separate' towards 'universal, open to all'. It means moving from 'matching the service to the diagnosis' to 'matching the service to the aspiration'. It means moving from 'we know best' to 'we are learning from each other and responding to each other'. It means moving from 'we're in charge' to 'we are making this together'. It means moving from 'we're doing our best – trust us' to 'we need independent safeguards and scrutiny to keep us right'. It means moving from 'you come to us' to 'we'll come to you'. It means moving from being detached from ordinary communities and facilities to being embedded in neighbourhoods and generic organisations.

Changing these design assumptions means that service design has to be better. It presents design challenges no less worthy of attention than designing safe airports, accessible trains, and usable tin-openers.

The third approach is questioning the function and rationale of an existing service. For example, what is the problem to which 'respite' is the answer? Not that a 7 year old girl has an impairment, not that she needs help to eat, not that she needs attention three times a night, not that this work is tiring and stressful for the parents. The problem is a lack of family support.

In the current set-up, most families bringing up a child with an impairment only get help when the child is not there. Instead of getting help to be a family and have a life as a family, they are pushed into seeing and treating one child differently.

The fourth approach is questioning our beliefs and values – what we mean by better. When we imagine better, do we picture a world without frailty, a world where no child fails an exam, where no-one makes a mistake – or do we picture a world where we ourselves are more tolerant, more supportive, more forgiving and more welcoming?

Service reform can only work if we unpeel the onion and work on the heart of the issue as well as the surface.

Service reform is important, but it cannot be detached from social change. These two are tied together like people in a three-legged race.

At the moment, services do a great deal to hold back social change. Charity shops, the language of special needs, special buildings, the careful separation of people from the mainstream – all these reinforce perceptions of us and them.

So reforming services will help to change society – but other work is needed too.

Social change

No-one is in charge of social change. Society changes because of technology, because of changes in the climate and environment, because of demography. But it also changes because of ideas whose time has come. The question is, can we do anything to help ideas survive and flourish? This is where the memes come in.

There are far more memes than there are brains for them to inhabit, and memes compete to survive. Most of these memes don't code for social change. The opening notes of Beethoven's fifth symphony, 'have a break, have a kit-kat', the tune of 'happy birthday' and 'if you build it they will come' all survive in the meme pool without doing much for inclusion one way or another. As far as inclusion goes, these are junk memes – like the 'junk DNA' which makes up most of the human genome.

Some successful memes do code for inclusion – like Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech and Marx's phrase 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs'.

We know some of the memes which discourage change: "it's the real world" , "it's just human nature". These are so good at getting themselves copied that they can jump within seconds from just one person in the room to the whole meeting and leave hope for dead.

So if we want to do some meme therapy and give the memes for inclusion a bit of help in the meme pool, what do we have to do?

First of all, we have to declare. Memes only survive by being passed on from person to person. We have to speak and write about inclusion.

Second, we need to be animated – worthy, but not dull. Our memes are competing for attention in a noisy environment– we have to be lively and entertaining if we want our memes to be passed on.

Third, we need successful memes. They have to be distinctive and compact — like the four notes of Beethoven's Fifth, Like 'All means all' or 'Everyone matters' Some memes have hooks into other memes, so they can burrow into our brains more easily — like 'what part of all don't you understand?' Some memes make our brains do work by having more than one meaning, like 'Imagine Better'.

Successful memes spread because they make sense and appeal to lots of people — they are universal. I have no idea why people love Mickey Mouse, but they do. Successful memes find the vehicles they need: Apple won, not by selling more computers, but by imitation: the idea of an intuitive interface which everyone could use competed successfully against the idea of 'computers are for techies'.

Memes are not just ways of speaking. They are also ways of doing. Fear of difference is the meme for exclusion, and the best vehicle for that fear is segregation. One of the memes we need for inclusion is being at ease in the presence of difference. The best vehicle for that meme is inclusive school and pre-school education.

Role models are memes. We imitate them because we admire what they do. We need to find more agents of inclusion to inspire us, and we have to learn to be inspired.

Doing things together is a meme. The biggest change we have seen since the parliament is government ministers sitting down with ordinary people and working alongside them. This meme could just catch on.

Finally, we need new memes — lots of them, because most of them will die. And to create these memes, we have to use our imagination. As George Orwell nearly said, 'Copy good, imagine better'.

The dictionary gives two definitions of imagine:

To form a mental picture of something
To use the creative ability of the mind

To imagine better we have to form a mental picture of better — and we have to be better at using the creative abilities of our minds. I hope this conference helps us with both challenges.