

## Where do I stand? Afterthoughts

*We have to do what's right  
even if we don't succeed.*

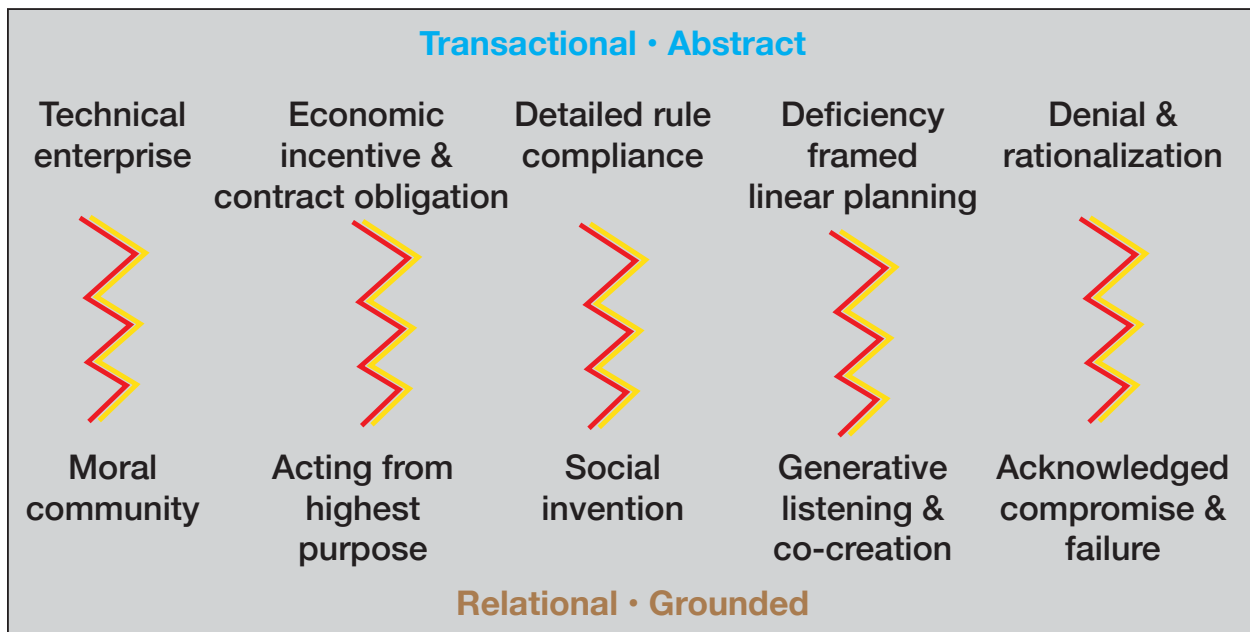
*–Margaret Wheatley*

*Hope is not the same as  
optimism. It is not the  
conviction that something  
will turn out well, but the  
certainty that something  
makes sense, regardless of  
how it turns out.*

*–Vaclav Havel*

“Where do I stand?” is a helpfully ambiguous question. Our answers included statements of the values we stand for and the too common practices we stand against: for inclusion, person-centered supports, self-direction and community building; against segregation, congregation, bureaucratic imposition and the perpetuation of a separate “special” world. We framed our work in terms of a quest for social justice. We affirmed a desire to stand with people as allies rather than over them as supervisors or apart from them as detached professional observers. We celebrated expressions of the spirit of innovation and grieved the enclosure of the open space necessary to keep discovering better ways.

Another sense of the question interests me. “Where do I stand?” in the social field defined by the tensions we identified in our conversations, including these among others.



Progress, incomplete as it is, has emerged from diverse relationships grounded in the struggle for life experiences that are sources and consequences of freedom: a real home, a meaningful job, community engagement, membership, friendship and intimacy.<sup>1</sup> Those who have best nurtured this emergence have been intentional members of a moral community, bound and animated by striving toward the equality-in-difference that characterizes the Beloved Community. This purpose (or whatever other form the vision of just and inclusive community takes) makes it meaningful and exciting to search for new possibilities and invent the social forms that will realize them. Social invention rests on a capacity for generative listening and co-creation. The powers of social exclusion and devaluation hold such sway in our society that compromises of values and moments of failure are both inevitable and useful in refining our social inventions, so honest acknowledgement of compromises and failures and mindful inquiry into the learning they offer is necessary to the work.

This pattern of social invention, grounded in relationships, has offered challenge and meaning since the early days of reforms that aimed to make institutions unnecessary. Since the turn of the century, abstract, transactional forces have gathered strength.<sup>2</sup> Most of these result from efforts to discipline growing demand for public expenditure on long terms support. They show up when ideas about the efficiency of markets coexist incoherently with a rising tide of directions from more detached government bureaucracy. This regime springs from two assumptions. First, that service is a technical enterprise that applies cost efficient programs to objectively assessed need. Services are driven to accuracy and efficiency by economic incentives to meet contract specifications and conform to rules. Second, that no one in direct relationship with people with developmental disabilities can be trusted. Compliance with detailed rules –which are said to be based on evidence based practices and documented in outcome metrics when they are not reactive to real or imagined public scandal– keeps people healthy and safe and assures service quality. Mandated change, whether individual or organizational, is managed from the top by linear processes that set goals and defines and controls the steps to attain them. In practice, disruption is minimized by changing words rather than social conditions (“We installed locks on our group home bedroom doors and made tenant agreements with our residents; now everyone has chosen their own home.”). Potential risks are obsessively dissected and managed by limiting people’s freedom. When failure or compromise shows up an arsenal of maneuvers is deployed to ignore, explain away or shift blame.

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<sup>1</sup> Beth Mount and I explore the conditions that enable social invention in *Pathfinders: People with developmental disabilities and their allies building communities that work better for everybody* (<http://inclusion.com/pathfindersbk2.html>)

<sup>2</sup> I made a stab at describing this trend in *Cogworld: Supporting people with developmental disabilities in a mechanistic system*. <http://www.ddnetworkinc.org/cogworld.html>

The forces of abstraction masquerade as “the real world” and disdain the world of living relationships as the delusions of nostalgic flower children. Managerial fascination with Big Data multiplies demands to document, objectively assess, specify, report, check, flag, and justify. The assumption that fraud, neglect and abuse are pervasive requires detailed reporting of any possible infraction and frequent audits. This drives a fear of error that can manifest as obsession to detect and repair documentation errors before inspectors do. It is difficult to keep bureaucratic maintenance from eating more and more of the attention of support coordinators, managers and even direct support workers. Time honored tactics –“just get the paperwork out of the way efficiently and then focus on relationships” and “as managers, our job is to protect you from worry about compliance, so just tend your relationships”– become less and less effective.

Under these conditions, commitment to supporting good lives drives overwork. Committed people strive to outrun the system treadmill and get far enough ahead of bureaucratic maintenance to do satisfying work with people. Time for learning, reflection and renewal shrinks, vaporized into webinars. Leaders scour each new government re-organization and top-down “Transformation” initiative to identify real opportunities. The search for work-arounds to torque increasingly elaborate financing and regulatory schemes that are more and more disconnected from enabling good support into the means to offer person-centered support. Breakthrough stories become remembrances of times past more than celebrations of current victories. As contact with the soul of the work fades, symptoms develop: disturbed sleep, chronic muscle tension, difficulty focusing, anger, anxiety and depression.

The challenge of this time is to live in truth. This involves a conscious choice to open our minds, hearts and wills to these tensions, discerning good moves and making them.<sup>3</sup> Rather than ignoring what pulls us off the ground of deepening relationships and reaching together for the Beloved Community, accounting the ways that the forces of transaction and abstraction affect us and the costs to people who count on us for support –and ourselves. Rather than telling ourselves that we can manage our changing environment with our current knowledge and alliances, considering what we need to invent to adapt to new demands and conserve what we need live in authentic relationships. Rather than ignoring the compromises imposed by the structures we have built and consented to, naming the constraints on doing the right thing built-in to the designs of our collective investments in congregate services, our current attempts to escape congregation, and the mindsets that drive our financing. Rather than seeing “the system” as something alien that we could escape, recognizing the

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<sup>3</sup> From the perspective of an agency executive, Hanns Meissner discusses the effects of competing commitments on real change and the importance of becoming in an ambidextrous agency in *Creating blue space: Fostering innovative support practices for people with developmental disabilities* (<http://inclusion.com/bkcreatingbluespace.html>.) As he observed in our conversations, it is increasingly difficult to deal creatively with competing commitments and act ambidextrously as an organization.

interdependencies that make our work possible and provide what openings there may be to do good work. Rather than assuming that things will inevitably soon get better, trying on a perspective that holds that our whole civilization is moving into a time of collapse and imagine the implications of this for co-creating good lives with marginalized people.<sup>4</sup> Rather than wishing to move back to better times, grieving for what has been lost and turning toward possible futures.

The point of this sober reflection is not to produce guilt or despair or encourage withdrawal. No matter how our environment changes, the desire of people with developmental disabilities and those who love them for more of a good life remains constant, if often hidden. So does the challenge of building the Beloved Community. The social creativity necessary to meet this desire and this challenge depends on our capacity to name and creatively engage constraints. So does our co-creative capacity to glimpse the highest potential in complex situations and move into those possibilities. We are good at dealing with constraints that we accept and respond to; we get stuck when we deny them and move away from the life energies that want to shift them. We are good at the work of creation when we are open to the future; we stall when judgment, cynicism and fear shut us down.

The imperative, “do the right thing”, is a good signpost for a journey into complexity.<sup>5</sup> Someone with certainty about what is right and the power to impose that certainty on others can proceed as if the right thing were obvious. But respect for human differences calls for co-sensing and dialogue to discover a best approximation of what the right thing is in each particular situation. Constraints make figuring out how to do the right thing a matter of co-creation. Apart from a chaotically dangerous situation, first right thing to do is to gather co-creators and build a shared sense of what wants to be born and what action will shift constraints enough to allow emergence of the new.

The social field generated by tensions between grounded relationships and abstract transactions challenges our trust. To move creatively on the field of tensions asks us to trust that a highest purpose exists in any circumstance and that we can co-create ways to move into that purpose with the capabilities and assets that we can find in that place. We are challenged to trust that the living heart of the ideals and powerful practices that brought us to this point can be conserved as we adapt to powerful forces indifferent to them. The steps we can actually take may be frustratingly slow, painfully small, and compromise much that we would wish for, but we can find meaningful next steps if we stay open to where we are and committed to our best understanding of what wants to be born.

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Wheatley (2017) adopts this perspective in *Who do we choose to be? Facing reality, claiming leadership, restoring sanity*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler.

<sup>5</sup>Patti Scott and I have begun to explore support coordination in a constrained environment in *Working in complexity*. Download a copy from the *Where do I stand?* facebook page.

As we reminded ourselves at Tulpehaking Nature Center, a reliable way to initiate a social field that can generate purposeful action is almost always available. When things get conflicted and confused we can trust a quality of relationship that we can access if we remember to...

...slow down

...seek new perspectives by engaging people with different positions, in places at the margins of our usual attention

...find our center, and find it again as we become distracted, by breathing deeply

...attend with an attitude of curiosity and desire to see through other's eyes

...notice and quiet the voices of judgement, cynicism and fear as they arise to protect us by keeping us from what could unsettle us or disrupt our current reality

...be internally still and open and listen for what wants to be born with our help