

One-to-One Recruitment of One-to-One Friends A Friendship Lesson from the Pandemic

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One lesson of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 is that one-to-one relationships have been more likely to be sustained in trying times than group membership and belonging.

Many years ago I visited Jeanne Cooney, an Attleboro woman who had intellectual disability, who lived alone, and who had been matched with a friend without disability. Her residential provider agency had one part-time worker who was specifically charged with recruiting such relationships. As Jeanne told us about how important that friend was to her, she recounted a time not long before our visit, when there was an electrical power failure in her neighborhood, and how glad she was to have her friend to whom to turn. Jeanne said, ***“When you have no power, it’s good to have a friend.”***

So true, Jeanne! Especially if one is vulnerable, especially if one is powerless, especially in times of trial, whether that might be a power failure or a pandemic, it’s good to have a friend. Jeanne and her matched friend remained important to one another for thirty years.

When, in the late winter of 2020, we found ourselves closed off from most of our ordinary interactions by the necessity of physical distancing, we noticed a big difference in how well community relationships were sustained, depending on which of the two big strategies for building relationships had been followed. Over these past fifty years of community services, we have moved almost entirely away from institutions for people with intellectual disabilities, first by providing large group homes which were still quite segregating, then by assisting people like Jeanne who were quite able, to go on to apartment living with visiting supports. But as we continued to break down segregation, resulting in lonely people in their own apartments, we saw that concerted we needed to develop focused approaches so that people with and without disabilities could build friendships.

Two Overall Strategies for Building Friendships

In order to build such friendships, we have relied almost entirely on the strategy of assisting people to become members of community groups and organizations, both formal and informal. If people could become “regulars” at the Y, in a church congregation or parish, in a yoga class or an art class, in a political party or environmental group or neighborhood association or chorus or softball league or community college, or even just as a regular among the Thursday morning breakfast gang at the coffee shop, or the Sunday evening gang at the sports bar— then they would naturally make a friend there, right? We have placed nearly all of our bets on this route to friendship.

Such membership and belonging are certainly rewarding in themselves. But we have found that they very seldom lead to a one-to-one friendship. Development of a friend turns out not to be as “natural” as we had hoped, especially if the person with a disability is not fluent conversationally, whether from shyness or from limited ability.

In addition to the challenges for the potential friend with a disability, there is the sad reality of **devaluation**—the unconscious bias most people have that often kicks in instantly to put up a barrier on the part of the potential friend without a disability. The “eyes of the beholder” may prejudge the person with a disability, so it is vital that any effort to bring people together must view the ordinary, valued citizen as the “client” of our change effort. Because of these invisible barriers, the “natural” route to possible friendship is only a very partial strategy. It is one which we must continue to pursue, but it is a strategy with a low “batting average” at turning fellow members into true friends.

And now we find that, in some kinds of troubled times, even the limited effectiveness of that strategy disappears. After the coronavirus (COVID-19) hit us all in the spring and summer and autumn and winter of 2020, the Y and churches and restaurants and bars closed, group meetings stopped or they switched to being only on screen, and every kind of class was cancelled. The people we had helped to attain valued membership in those groups were left high and dry, often without having exchanged contact information. The medium through which relationship was transacted had disappeared. Such a pandemic may or may not come again, but we can imagine other times of trouble which would have a similar effect. Short term disruption could come from a power failure or a snowstorm; long term disappearance could come from the group or its venue ending or changing. And into each of our lives, inevitably, times will come because of illness or transition when group membership will be interrupted or ended. We must put ourselves in one another’s shoes and ask-- Who will be there for me? Who will be there with me, who is not being paid to be there?

And yet, if a person vulnerable to segregation or loneliness has developed a **one-to-one** relationship, it was hugely more likely to be sustained, whether that was face-to-face or by phone or by e-mail and Zoom, or by letter. Now this requires pursuing a whole different strategy! But we believe it is a strategy with a much higher batting average in forming friendships, and a strategy which leads to relationships that are far more sustainable over time. This will be true in any times, but especially in troubled times.

This second big strategy depends not on what we wish would happen “naturally,” but on being **intentional**. This alternative strategy is one-to-one **recruitment** of a partner in a one-to-one freely given friendship.

Three Focused Recruitment Programs

This strategy is used in one model which has worked powerfully to form friendships between people with and without disabilities, people who would not otherwise meet, by Citizen

Advocacy (CA) programs. The idea was originated fifty years ago by Wolf Wolfensberger, who was also the developer of the overall service approaches called normalization and social role valorization. There is one CA program in Massachusetts, North Quabbin Citizen Advocacy; its Director, Nate Johnson, joined our Pathways conversation on November 5th.

Nate and Bonnie Frank, as Citizen Advocacy coordinators, develop a freely-given friendship by first recruiting a person with a disability. They gather information about the person's background, about the difficulties and good things in their current situation, their vulnerabilities and their opportunities. Then they compose a "portrait" of the person, which includes ideas for what roles a friend/advocate might play, and what sort of non-disabled person would be most fruitfully recruited to get to know the person with the disability. Nate and Bonnie use their community networks and connections to recruit a valued citizen without a disability. They orient the new recruit to what they will need to know about their new friend and what they will need to know about expectations for vulnerable people in our society. They will then make the "match," introduce the two, and begin to provide ongoing contact that will continue to support each relationship for as long as it lasts. Many relationships have turned out to be life-long, and North Quabbin has developed over three hundred such one-to-one relationships over the past thirty-five years. Some of these relationships are purely a friendship, some provide sponsorship into community life, some are more oriented to advocacy or practical help for the disabled partner, and many relationships are a mixture of friendship, community integration, and practical advocacy.

Citizen advocacy programs, by definition, are **independent** of the service system, so they will not find themselves constrained in the advocacy which the new partners may offer. CA programs, therefore, are established as non-profit organizations with a well-connected board of directors drawn from their local community. They have often found it difficult to establish and sustain themselves financially. Founding a CA program in your community, though devoutly to be wished, would be a major undertaking.

A few residential providers in Massachusetts have sought to get some of the benefit that a CA program would bring, but with less commitment of time and money, by establishing a small program **within** their agencies. They have devoted part of one staff member's time to recruiting and matching and supporting new relationships between people with and without disabilities. In our meeting on November 5th, we were joined by Mary Ellen Goodwin, who formerly directed such a program for Beta Community Partnerships in Attleboro, the program that introduced Jeanne Cooney and her new friend many years ago.



Our November 5th Pathways conversation also included Katie Driscoll, who has just begun to establish such a program within BAMSI, a service provider agency in Brockton and surrounding towns, and Mark Pasquini, who has just begun to establish such a program within CapeAbilities, a service provider agency on Cape Cod.

Another existing program within the service system which also operates by one-to-one recruitment of one-to-one relationships is Bridges to Faith in New Bedford, whose part-time coordinator Heather Dextrateur also joined our November 5th conversation. Bridges to Faith (and the similar program, Spiritual Connections, in Fall River) operate by identifying individuals with disabilities who have expressed interest in joining a religious community, then recruiting an active member of such a community who will be a “faith companion” to introduce the new member of the congregation to their new role. Bridges to Faith thus does **not** assume that merely joining the congregation will turn “naturally” into full participation and consequently into one-to-one friendships; instead, they recruit a specific individual willing to be the new member’s guide and ambassador. Bridges to Faith is funded by the DDS area office to work with all area service provider agencies, and Heather works just one day a week as its coordinator.

So here we see three variations on the same theme: a specific program, focused entirely on one-to-one recruitment of one-to-one relationships, whether it is part of the service system or independent of it.

Such focused programs have been rare, but they have a gratifying track record. These programs have learned lessons over the years about what is more fruitful, and what is less fruitful, in developing and sustaining such relationships, and we discussed these lessons in our November 5th conversation.

First, such programs should focus on particular geographic communities, and the coordinator of the program should be well-connected in those communities. Not connected in the human service system-- connected in the broader community.

Second, recruitment would be one-to-one, **customized** for the needs and interests of the person with a disability. Not advertising, not speeches meant to raise general interest, but recruitment, matchmaking, and support **specific to one person**. This approach has been most effective at finding someone who will say “yes,” and it has also been most effective so we can be confident that the person recruited would be reliable. Such person-to-person recruitment through personal networks, in fact, tends to be a **far better safeguard** than official criminal background checks.

So the coordinator would be repeatedly asking herself strategic questions like, “Whom do I know, who might know somebody, who might be willing to get to know this individual with a disability?” And “To whom can I turn to give me a name and a phone number?” Board members are likely to be a major source of good “leads.” And “Who are the gatekeepers of organizations and neighborhoods in our community, the unofficial social leaders?” For instance, often the church secretary may be more informative and influential than the pastor.

Third, provider agency programs have found that the coordinator should be a specific person with this specific assignment, rather than expecting many people to work at such recruitment

when they get around to it after fulfilling other duties which seem always to take precedence. The program at Beta faded away as extraneous duties were added to the coordinator's job.

Fourth, the hardest part of the coordinator's job is what Tom Doody calls "*the ask*" (the invitation to engagement). It takes nerve as well as good connections, it feels pushy, it can bring a feeling of personal disappointment when one's invitation is declined. Tom found that reluctance to go ahead and "make the ask" was the biggest predictor of failure by a new coordinator. By way of encouragement, more people say "yes" than one might expect, and almost never over the decades have coordinators found that anyone was annoyed to be asked. Such an "ask" should include a suggestion of what the potential friend has in common with the person with a disability; it should include suggestions of what particular help the new friend might be able to offer.

The new friends thus recruited must immediately come to see their relationship as the focus of their loyalty, not the Citizen Advocacy program or the human service agency which has recruited them. Therefore, it would probably be a mistake to call the newly-recruited friend without a disability a "volunteer." The new friend will need some setting of expectations or orientation, but it should not be framed as "training," as if they were paid staff. The program should avoid any structures or practices which would tend to "clientize" the person with a disability, or to "staff-ize" the new relationship. The fact that the relationship is *freely-given*, rather than paid or even reimbursed in any indirect way, is crucial to the very nature of friendship.

One-to-One Relationship Building Within Group Membership

At the beginning of this essay, we described group membership as a different (and generally less effective) strategy toward friendship. But here we will propose that, once a person with a disability has begun to feel a sense of belonging as a member of a formal or informal group, then they (and their support staff or family) can "make an ask" of another group member, to develop a one-to-one friendship.

For instance, if a person begins to feel at home in the yoga class, or the church congregation or parish, or with the regulars at the sports bar, or walking in their neighborhood, then a *one-to-one* approach can be made to the established member who seems to be the most welcoming. Such an approach might be made by the person with a disability, after coaching and encouragement by their staff or family. Or the approach might be made by the support worker or family, with the permission of the person with a disability. The approach might take the form of a request for assistance or a ride, and it might include an expression of gratitude for being so welcoming. The approach might be an invitation for a visit outside the usual context of the group membership, thus inviting a new role relationship as friends, to be added to the existing role relationship as fellow members.

Other Relationship Building Strategies for Support Staff

There is another opportunity for the support staff assigned to an individual to make an “ask” and invite one-to-one friendship. A worker (in a group home, in shared living, in vocational or day services, in service coordination) could ask one of her own friends or family members if they might be willing to get to know a person with a disability whom she serves. The worker could offer the invitation, could introduce the new friends, and could gradually withdraw so that the new friendship could take on a life of its own.

If the person with a disability lives in a human service setting such as a group home, his staff must be supportive other ways too, in addition to making the “ask.” The group home (or shared living setting) must carefully be made hospitable in its room arrangements, furnishings, its stock of coffee and tea and foods, its readiness to turn off the television or other distractions from conversation, and its habits of courtesy. Staff must offer coaching and assistance to the person with a disability to help him learn the new role of host to a friend. Staff must assist the person to know what to wear so that he will come across most positively. Staff must know how to be good ambassadors in bringing together new friends, and also know when to back off, to encourage the new friends to grow closer.

What Difference Will It Make?

As we said at the beginning, one-to-one friendships are far more likely to be sustained in troubled times. They may be sustained (as group membership may not be) over time, and over distance, even “when you have no power.”

And in all times, we must recognize the indispensability for every person to have a friend who is not paid to be with you, and not assigned to you by the State. Every human being, even if only silently, someplace deep inside, asks, ***“Who will be there for me?”***