

How to Function With Personal Moral Coherency in a Disfunctional Human Service World

Wolf Wolfensberger had a relentlessly curious intellect. He researched and wrote on many topics, and also developed a number of seminar presentations, up to a week in length, to both share his findings and analysis and offer practical strategies to his students and associates, primarily human service workers.

In the early 1970's, he had been part of a major collective effort in Nebraska to close Beatrice State Home, an institution for persons with intellectual impairments and to create community based alternatives for them. This effort, which involved considerable analysis and collaborative effort on the part of professionals, government bureaucrats, families, and community members, bore many fruits for the persons in question, and also served as a world-wide model for similar such efforts. Wolfensberger wrote about this in a chapter, "Why Nebraska?" of a book, "*Out of the Darkness and Into the Light*" (Schalock, 2002).

In 1971, Wolfensberger moved to Canada at the invitation of the Canadian Association for the Mentally Retarded, to serve as a visiting scholar. While there, he wrote the seminal text *Normalization*, for which he is arguably best known. In addition, he distilled the principles he had gleaned from his work in Nebraska into a series of professional training workshops on human service planning, delivery and change agency.

Some would-be implementers lacked the skills or determination to stick with the task of change as advocated by Wolfensberger. Others were coopted by the systems they sought to change. Still others abandoned human service work for greener pastures. But many of Wolfensberger's students took his principles to heart, and returned to their professional roles eager to implement them and thereby effect positive change, and did approach the challenge with the disciplines he had taught them, and some stick-to-it-ive-ness. However, in spite of the soundness of the principles, the tools they had acquired, and their sincerity and determination, many of these change agents were met with powerful opposition: their efforts were quashed, and they were attacked and often even evicted from their jobs.

An appreciation of the disfunctionalities in human services had long been present in Wolfensberger's work, including in the Nebraska era of service reform. As far back as 1968, Wolfensberger had concluded, and subsequently taught, that "... *planning of human services required successful address of a very large number of very difficult and very complex issues, and that such address required the highest level of intellectual and scholarly discipline which has to be strongly tied to a firm positive ideological base.*" (Syracuse University

Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency, 2004). When he moved on to Syracuse University (in Syracuse, New York) in 1973, the title he gave to his Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency clearly implied his belief that human services were seldom well-planned in advance but needed to be, often lacked adaptive leadership, and had serious flaws that could be overcome by committed actors. However, he began to realize that because human services are formed by the society and world in which they exist, they will inevitably reflect and express their larger context. Whatever virtues, moral failings and propensities that a particular society, in a particular time, might possess, those characteristics will be echoed by, and find expression in, that society's human services. Therefore, serving with integrity depends on understanding how best to deal with the dynamics and disfunctionalities of those larger contexts, as well as with their impacts on the moral coherency or incoherency expressed in one's serving function. These understandings soon evolved into the first iteration of what is now a week-long seminar on *"How to Function with Personal Moral Coherency in a Disfunctional World, Including its Human Services."* As the title indicates, this teaching event is intended to better enable human service workers to maintain their moral integrity over time while working--often struggling--to provide adaptive service.

This teaching engendered a new set of tools for those wishing to provide good service to vulnerable people and to effect change in existing human services. Notably, it suggested new foci: in addition to understanding the dynamics of human service organizations and systems, it stressed the importance of understanding the moral foundations and climate of one's times and society, and personal contexts. Even more importantly, the workshop calls people to examine their own morality, determine its soundness, and align their beliefs and actions with valid truths about the world and the way it works, including human nature, both individual and collective. This in itself, Wolfensberger argues, is profoundly at odds with aspects of the current culture of what he and others term modernism, which proclaims that there are no universal truths, only those which each person determines for him or her self. Wolfensberger identifies this modernism as a root cause of the decline of modern society and a continuing threat, especially to lowly people. He exhorts his listeners to rigorously discern the moral dimensions of that society and to take a personal moral stance in contradiction to the evils and threats they identify and encounter. Contained within the workshop are teachings and exercises on classical tools of philosophy, such as rational moral analysis and the identification of logical fallacies.

This workshop does not paint a rosy picture of our world and the times in which we find ourselves. To the contrary, it offers an indictment and a warning to those who would acquiesce to the prevailing values and morality. Wolfensberger identifies current modern values such as extreme individualism, materialism, and sensualism as responsible for the corrosion of older, traditional values. As these decadent

modern values destroy the traditional ones, so do they erode the foundations of society, our sense of comity and polity. Many attendees are discouraged by this, but others are liberated by the call to clarify one's own morality and stand in contradiction to a modern world that in many essential ways has gone terribly wrong.

With an eye to preserving this material, continuing the research behind it, and ensuring its availability in the future, Wolfensberger assembled a cadre of others who had found great merit in his teachings. This group meets to study the material of the seminar on "*How to Function with Personal Moral Coherency in a Disfunctional World, Including its Human Services*," discuss contemporary expressions of the principles therein, and to promote the training seminars. The group aims to offer the seven-day training event at least once every other year. It has taught the workshop many times in the United States and Canada, as well as in England and Australia.

Similar groups have formed, with similar structure and purpose, around other of Wolfensberger's many areas of research and teaching, such as Social Role Valorization, the philosophy of Personalism, and the importance of defending the lives of vulnerable persons (and others) in the face of the many threats to the sanctity of those lives.

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References

Schalock, Robert L., (2002). *Out of the Darkness and Into the Light*, American Association on Mental Retardation, Washington, D.C.

Syracuse University Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency (2004). *May 2004 Supplementary Information for the Workshop Entitled "How to Function Morally, Coherently, & Adaptively in a World That is Disfunctional, Including its Human Services."* Syracuse, N.Y.