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Lingering Shadows of Wolf Wolfensberger in Canada

Honouring Wolf Wolfensberger half a century after publishing *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services*, a book putting him firmly on the international stage, allows for reflections on his lasting influence apart from whatever enthusiasms there were at the time.   His contributions were many, though passage of time, circumstance and new ideas may push their origins into the shadows. I'll speak to some in the Canadian context.

An email I received a few weeks ago is an illustration. Said Larry:
> *If you remember, sometime in the early 70s – the summer of 72 or 73??—you mentored a group of 4 young people on an MCC Saskatchewan assignment looking at services to senior citizens. At the time, I remember you raising Wolfensberger's thesis that services to clients – mentally or physically handicapped, senior citizens – should aim at creating as normal a setting as possible, should consider the wishes of the "client".*

The writer was one of four undergraduate students, each paired with an elder/sage, sent out to interview a cross-section of seniors (some living in 'nursing homes', some in the community, some in cities, some in small towns) on their aspirations of how to live life to its conclusion. The intent was to determine how a church related organization might best support them. The outcome was a report encouraging support for aging at home rather than building large congregate living sites. Fifty years later, after retiring from a distinguished teaching career, he observes that issues affecting older adults today sound like those of 50 years ago and asks about Wolf's thinking – a remarkable subliminal lingering shadow of thought.

By happenstance, it was in 1972 that I came to know Wolf. Allan Roeher, Director of Canada's National Institute on Mental Retardation (NIMR), had enticed Wolf join him in shaping a parent organization-led Canada-wide campaign to replace segregated forms of service with comprehensive community-based, person-centered, 'normalizing' supports for people with developmental disabilities – *ComServ* it came to be called. One spring day I received a surprise call from NIMR. Might I come by if I had occasion to be in Toronto? They'd like to learn about Saskatchewan's pioneering community mental health systems. I'd had no prior contact with the Institute but was intrigued with the request – more so when I learned that Roeher was a fellow Saskatchewanian with an analogous background. That explained his financial parsimony. As it happened, I had a trip in the offing, so we arranged a date to spend two days together.

Saskatchewan, at the time, was a cradle of human service innovation, internationally known for the first universal hospital and medical care program in the Americas. Not so well known was its Saskatchewan Plan adopted in 1956 to replace two large, isolated 'mental hospitals' with a province wide system of comprehensive community-based services/supports for people with serious mental health impairments. My role was to document the decline in mental hospital

population (the first closed in 1971), help shape development of new forms of service, evaluate their effectiveness and disseminate learning through the entire system.

The idealist in me too often had seen the ills of large residential 'treatment' institutions – my mentors framing it as 'animals in zoos being better treated than people in mental hospitals.' We knew with certainty what we needed to get away from. Our research had shown that giving 'institutionalized' people opportunity to do normal things like read news magazines left at strategic places in large common rooms, help with preparing meals and other normal activities, they'd respond in normal ways. In fact, a considerable number, in essence, had become unpaid staff. We'd learned that small, community integrated, and personally meaningful supports invariably were better. We'd also learned that people with significant depression or psychoses enabled to remain in their community environments invariably did not develop the 'institutional behaviour' characteristic in 'mental hospitals'; and, when 'institutionalized' people were introduced back to community settings, normal behaviours gradually reappeared. What we didn't have was a way of framing the intended experience of people receiving services. It was there that the Normalization Principle immediately made sense to me.

That initial meeting with Allen, Wolf and others at the Institute led to a 3-month role in working alongside Wolf to develop the *ComServ* plan; and, later, I took up leadership positions in NIMR at regional and national levels.

Both Allan and Wolf took pride in their ability to work long days and expected it of those working with them. Critique of the existing and the possible was a constant. A criterion-based evaluation tool, *Program Analysis of Service Systems (PASS)* (Wolfensberger & Glenn) mainly premised on *The Principle of Normalization,* was published in 1973 and served as the prime resource for training successive cohorts younger and older adults across Canada on how to critically review existing services against more ideal alternatives. Simultaneously community-based, person-directed, normalizing support service ideals expressed in Omaha's ENCOR innovations for developmentally disabled people were adapted to the Canadian context, and formed the basis of awareness training events on what *ComServ* might look like. Such events were supplemented by a succession of guided visits by groups of Canadians to Omaha, and reciprocal invitation of people with expertise to join us at training events in Canada. And then there was promotion of self-advocacy and development of the *People First* movement involving people with intellectual disabilities to advocate for their right to live in the community (and get out of institutions), the first such group founded on Canada's west coast.

Wolf was in Canada full time for only two years (1971 – '73), with periodic visits thereafter, but those were filled with intense activity setting the stage for implementing the *ComServ* plan to follow. During those initial three months we worked on fleshing out the plan and developing funding proposals, along with my becoming immersed in normalization principles by participating in early PASS training events. I took Wolf to visit Saskatchewan's regional community mental health services and a Hutterite community (members took it as their responsibility to find room in their community for disabled children and adults), visiting the first L'Arche community outside of France newly set up just north of Toronto and sundry other human service innovations to inform development and implementation of the *ComServ* Plan.

These and other preparatory activities set the stage for a nation-wide competition for one region in each province to be designated as a national experimental and demonstration (E & D) *ComServ* region, the winners to receive additional training and financial support beyond provincial government funding to implement their models. It was as an intense time of national system change activity, with multiple workshops and training events taking place in conjunction with parent organizations and governments across the country, in the process gathering a cohesive cadre of individuals committed to the ideals Wolf had been espousing.

Wolf was a master at change agentry for the most part. He prepared for and organized his cadres of emerging 'trainers' not only to know the content for training events (whether in *PASS* or *ComServ*); developed detailed 'transparencies/overheads' they'd have to plausibly explain to new, often sceptical audiences; trained them to prepare backup plans for situations where things might go wrong. He reflexively ensured that training events were strategically located for maximum impact, and that the content would galvanize the intended audiences. He drove home the power of positive deviance – of the larger principles to be strived for if marginalized people were to be included in society – the normalization principle, the detailed analyses of factors influencing effective services systems, and so on. And he knew the import of creating a mutually supportive culture amongst those committed to such ideals and their implementation. While he knew the import of building alliances between key stakeholders to achieve success, he was aware his personal style of vigorously pursuing his objectives wasn't always helpful in alliance building and better left to the likes of Allan Roeher and others.

In the end, funding was obtained for only the first two of a hoped for ten national E & D models, one in Alberta and one in Quebec. In these two provinces, regions not garnering national E&D status were determined not to be outshone – their provincial governments largely sympathetic. The provinces not awarded national E & D recognition by and large ignored that and were determined not to be left behind. Altogether, the intensity of activities initiated in those two years by Wolf and NIMR personnel along with growing numbers of community volunteers had a profound and continuing effect on all provinces through the remaining decade.

At NIMR we kept track of the growth in various community-based programs across Canada. One benchmark was availability of community living options. In the early 1970s, there were an easily countable number of 'group homes' for adults (normally, up to 8 individuals, some larger). By 1977 or '78 we gave up counting – largely because 'group homes' had been replaced by increasing numbers of smaller housing options of 2 to 4 people sharing accommodation to the point they no longer were easily countable. Analogous changes were taking place in pre-school and educational settings, and in reform of approaches to employment of adults with developmental disabilities.

That was the plus side. But anyone involved in change agentry knows that forces of change inevitably come to a point of diminishing returns. Some of this can be attributed to resistance to the fundamental ideas being advanced, or jealousies at the attention given to advocates of change ideas, and there was some of that; but other more serious factors have a habit of slowing down and redirecting change campaigns.

An illustration: Most of us know that the *normalization principle* came to be dropped in favour of *social role valorization* – at least one story of it, and no doubt that'll be discussed in this *Festschrift*. There was in my view a regrettable 'professional' difference of opinion on the concept between Bengt Nirje and Wolf Wolfensberger. At its heart, it seemed to me, were two world views – one from a collectivist Scandinavian understanding of human rights, one of Germanic critical thinking mixed with American individualistic emphasis on human rights. Such differences are hard to bridge.

In the end, though, that didn't matter as much as larger shifts of thought about 'disability.' Emergence of the 'independent living' movement in the 1970s and '80s, driven by people with motor and sight impairments, replaced 'developmental disability' as dominant in international conversations on 'the disability file,' and shifted the conversation. From the 'independent living' perspective, the concept of 'normal' was wanting – societal 'norms' were viewed, not as desirable ends, but as 'disabling' someone in a wheelchair or having a sight impairment. Wolf, of course, would have been attuned to that and moved on.

The 'independent living' concept, too, lost its international lustre over time, with other shifts in ways of thinking having their effect – not nearly all of it intuitively good for humankind. Where in the 1970s and '80s we prized 'systems thinking' and a commitment to 'higher order principles' such as 'normalization' (or independent living) as ways of improving conditions for all people, those with intellectual impairments included, one scarcely hears such thought anymore – replaced, it seems, by individualist self-interest, or appeal to technological solutions for social problems, or searches for 'gurus' promising individual (rarely collective) wellbeing.

Yet, underneath, there still linger shadows of earlier thought – Wolf's prominent among them. Over the years there were folk in a few Canadian provinces who would invite Wolf back for one event or another. Alberta, where I spent 20 years, was one of those. Members of the parent community living association valued his input on measures promoting community inclusion they experimented with. A more mellow Wolf attended these events, but his insights were as acute as ever and well appreciated. Sound ideas like his continue to linger in the shadows, available to emerge as and when suitable opportunities arise.