

Wolfensberger film: panel presentation by Jack Yates

May 26, 2016 and May 11, 2017

My own journey, in fact my life's work, began near the very beginning of the first occasion I had to listen to Dr. Wolfensberger, at a PASS workshop in 1974. I had begun as a service coordinator almost two years before, but I had no preparation for such work, and no seriousness in my performance of it. I am ashamed to admit, to me it was just a job.

I arrived early for the workshop in Syracuse. I sat down in the front row to listen and take notes. The presentation began from Wolf and Mike Hogan, who was a doctoral student with Wolf at that time. Twenty minutes into the opening presentation on the concept of devaluation, which was entirely new to me, I was overwhelmed. I wrote into my notebook, (forgive the expression) "Holy shit! This is *serious!*"

Oh, I knew there were serious issues in this world. I was serious about the American war against Vietnam, about the civil rights movement, about left-wing politics. But I had never realized until that moment, that the lives of people with disabilities, and how people with disabilities are treated by our society, were also serious issues, and for exactly the same reasons.

Starting very soon thereafter, my job became teaching, derived from Wolf's work, and that has been my work's focus for over forty years now.

To complete my own story of Wolf being my principle teacher, I want to call attention to a dynamic which the film mentioned right near the end. What was Wolf's place in human services circa 1980, and what became his place over the decades since then? I might offer as a summary that, through the 1970's, Wolf was the intellectual leader of a powerful movement which revolutionized services. But by the mid-1980's, Wolf might be more accurately described as a lonely prophet, accompanied largely by a little band of apprentice teachers.

Why did that happen? Well, those who fell away or dismissed Wolfensberger's later teaching would identify factors different from my hypotheses. But I would say there were three major points of departure:

First, Wolf's teaching remained deeply and radically critical, not only of the institutions, but also of the very community service systems which we built. We. Us. People moved from awful institutions into beautiful houses in every community, but the valued social roles which would bring real membership and participation have been attained for a very small proportion of people. Of all the people who live in those beautiful group homes, how many could name even one person in their life who is neither paid to be with them, nor assigned to live with them, nor family? There are several places around the world, including southeastern Massachusetts, in which four-day Social Role Valorization workshops are conducted regularly, but at much smaller scale and much less widespread than were the Normalization workshops of the 1980's. Such sustained radical critique is not often funded by state governments nor large service providers.

Second, a major focus of Wolf's teaching from the 1980's through the present has been calling attention to the death-making of devalued people in our society, including not only growing acceptance of abortion and euthanasia but also the nearly ubiquitous use of prescription mind-drugs in many human service sectors. Wolf's workshops especially have focused on the societal values which fuel this death-making. A society like ours, which worships the gods of Self and Mammon, pride and avarice, will not do well by its members with disabilities. As a result, few have signed up for five- and seven-day workshops on these topics, though we continue to offer them.

And third, a logical derivative from the second factor but much more divisive, Wolf's teaching called attention, and condemnation, to the widespread and growing acceptance in our society of abortion and euthanasia. To put one manifestation of that question sharply and clearly:

Is selective abortion of babies with Down's Syndrome a woman's right? Or is it the systematic killing of our fellow human beings, members of the beloved community, because they have disabilities?

And yet-- we are grateful to Wolf, not only for his prophetic voice, but also for the practical and beautiful encouragement he has given us. Right here in our own area, his ideas and example are certainly indispensable to the best of our most fruitful work: our Leadership Series, Creating Our Common Wealth, people designing their own supports, and an amazing revolution in the lives people are living, and in the welcome which is increasingly offered by our communities.

So, my own journey began when I first listened to Wolf. Since then, it has been an amazing privilege to be a member of that little band of apprentice teachers whom Wolf invited to ***stand in contradiction*** to our society, to accompany his last decades, and to sustain his work.

Thank you.