

Safeguards Letter

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About natural consequences

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I've been thinking about the idea of natural consequences lately. My thoughts have gotten focused there, as I've listened to several public discussions about supporting people with disabilities in more independent lifestyles. In these discussions, using "natural consequences" has been suggested as a way of helping people. I've been troubled by what I've heard.

natural consequences fall into the category of things I regard as relative, in this case, relative to one's past experience and current situation. Both the current situation and past history of people who are labeled as poor, old, handicapped, neglected, Third World, etc, are radically different from those that many others of us enjoy.

What I find troubling in these conversations about helping people with disabilities to live more independent lifestyles is that the helpers act as though the natural consequences of events aren't relative the assumption is made that what happens to you or me in a situation is probably what people with disabilities will experience in a similar situation.

I hear no acknowledgement of nor accounting for the difference in personal vulnerability that nearly always exists between you or me and someone who has disabilities, who is poor or old or inexperienced. It seems to me that we've learned that being labeled by others increases a person's vulnerability. We've also learned that natural consequences impact a person's life and experience in proportion to one's state of personal security and vulnerability. Some people get far more than their share of natural consequences, and the consequences they experience are usually much graver.

I am always a bit surprised, and then dismayed, at how difficult it is to keep that understanding alive in my mind as I live my day to day life. One place in my life where I seem to have a particularly difficult time keeping my thinking straight about the difference in vulnerability is in the area of finances. I've always considered managing money a necessary chore. For example, much of the time I think of myself as a perpetual cash flow shortage manager. It seems that I spend quite a bit of my time thinking about how to keep our little system operating, I begin to think about people who make a lot of money, who seem to have money to throw away, or people who have a lot of money to invest, I slip into thinking that I know what it's like not to have much money. I think that I can identify with someone who is poor.

And then something happens to remind me of my relative prosperity and the real poverty of someone else. I am reminded of the relativity of natural consequences.

Several weeks ago, I got a call from a friend. He wanted some advice about a problem he was facing the month before, he was fired as the maintenance person at the apartment complex where he lived. His job had paid for his apartment, so he had to leave the apartment. He got another job, but he couldn't get another apartment without cash and references. He'd been working as many hours as he could get scheduled, and was living at his place of work. That was becoming a problem with his employers and the security people. He'd been told to get a place and a shower or no more job.

About seven weeks ago, I got my most recent paycheck. I'm used to getting one every couple of weeks. While I expected a somewhat longer interval between checks this time, I didn't think it would be such a long interval. Since I didn't adequately anticipate the delay and compensate for the resulting lack of cash, I experienced a cash flow crisis. I couldn't pay some of my bills on time, nor could I estimate with any confidence when I would be able to pay. After getting a pink slip from the bank, I called the banker, to explain why I hadn't made the mortgage payment. I blamed it on the bureaucracy and on the purchase of a tractor my spouse had fallen in love with. The banker chuckled, assured me that there was no problem, and asked me to send the payment when I received the check .

in our own ways, my friend and I have each experienced the natural consequences of being short of cash. My friend lost his home and his job and his reputation continues in jeopardy, at best. I have been mildly embarrassed, somewhat inconvenienced and very conscious of my good fortune. Quite a difference.

To talk about natural consequences in the context of the lives of vulnerable people without acknowledging and accounting for that vulnerability seems irresponsible. To fail to regard that vulnerability as a consciously thought about factor in any set of supports and assists we might design for people, seems harmful. To encourage others to support and assist people who are at risk without carefully taking into account the implications of those people's vulnerability seems both irresponsible and naive.

The things that help keep the natural consequences I experience manageable are things like lots of relationships with lots of people, lots of practice, others to help pay for things, others to help do the work that needs to be done, confidence that this is only temporary and being forgiven mistakes that I make. In other words, it takes lots of real help to offset the severity of natural consequences. My security comes from this help being there when I need it. Most of the help I get comes from people who know me well. If this same kind of help were present in my friend's life, his hurtful experiences would be less painful, his consequences more typical of yours or mine. I think it would be that way for most vulnerable people.

Until vulnerable people have in place the natural supports that most of us enjoy, natural consequences seems a risky helping strategy. In the continued absence of natural supports, natural consequences turns out to be just one more way of contributing to people's hurtful experiences.