

On "Being of Use"
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Safeguards Letter #2. March 1987

Recently, I read *Ciderhouse Rules* by John Irving. This popular book was entertaining. As well, it prompted me to think again about the idea of "being of use." Mr. Irving's characters offer examples of the fact that the decisions a person makes about what constitutes his/her "being of use!" in this world can effect a life-defining course of action. Although that sounds a bit dramatic, I tend to agree. I was reminded of my own preoccupation with the idea of "being useful" a few years ago and the changes I've realized in my own life resulting from decisions I made then.

Several years ago, I made the decision to retire from my brief stint as a full time employee. Over the years I had pretty much avoided full time employment as my sons were growing up. I had been fortunate enough to find part time work that was satisfying to me and that fit our schedules. There came the time, though, when I felt compelled to "earn" some traditional credentials as a full-time administrator.

I took a job that kept me pretty busy in that role for about four years .. I learned a lot about what it takes to manage the work of an organization. I also learned a lot about organizations and the dynamics that influence the decisions, actions, and values of organizations. I came to understand that organizations, even though they're composed of people, don't have the same capacity to act as human beings do.

I was able to think about my tenure in that job as a useful but painful practicum. My graduate education had focused on organization theory and management principles. I had thought a lot about and had studied change strategies and theories as well. The four years I spent trying to put these theories and principles to work and watching most of my efforts fail helped clarify for me the context in which purposeful, focused change can happen. It also strengthened my understanding about how vulnerable this context is.

In short; I learned a bit more about what undermines and defeats change efforts., and what supports and sustains such efforts. I was finally accepting the limits of organizations and discovering the enormous capacity of human communities.

So, my job ended, and I decided to retire! I'd. reached the conclusion that it would probably make a lot more sense for me to reframe the way I thought about useful work for a while than to seek another job. I tried to set aside the thoughts about how much money I needed to earn and what kinds of positions were currently available in the local job market.

Instead, I began to think about what I considered to be useful things. What was it that I wanted to learn more about, and what kinds of efforts might I best contribute to?

One of my persisting thoughts was that contributing would require being focused on just a few specific things in a particular place. Another idea was that the kind of contribution I was likely to make might take many years to accomplish. I knew, too, that the things I was most interested in learning more about would require that I become a part of some collaborative effort that involved many people. "Being of use" turned out to mean being an involved member of a community I could see myself being a part of for a long time. This meant a small place, where "needs" are vivid, and it meant the addition of one or a few more people who also wanted to "be of good. use."

What kinds of changes do I now attribute to this thinking about "being of good use" that I did a few years ago? I left the city and now live in the country. I left the single "lifestyle" and married. I stopped renting a house and began purchasing a home. I don't look for jobs. I try to create useful work to engage in with others. I continue to find this "'being of good use" thinking. a helpful way to look at myself in this world.