

**The Intimacy of Knowing;
A Socially Constructed Behavior Management Reality**

Introduction

Content one learns in a classroom. Feeling the emotions of the socially devalued from a person who has experienced it first hand is an experience taken to heart. Norman Kunc delivered one such insight. His parents could have listened to the specialists and sent him to an institution, but they decided to keep him at home to live a life with his family. Norman gave the viewer a lesson of the heart that cannot be gained from reading a book. Through the glimpses of Norman's life the future and present professional may start the seed of a new more person friendly narrative.

This brief review of Norman Kunc's and Emma Van der Klift's complex and insightful workshop focuses on messages students in a teacher preparation program at a local university understood to be the critical messages.

Understanding the realities of disability as a social construct and the root of harmful professionalism is concisely referenced in section one. The second section explores building a new way through knowing the voice of each person. Finally structures of current institutions are challenged as being harmful to the life giving nature of power and intimate relationships. Of these the most difficult to understand is the truth of disability as a socially constructed way of understanding people. The social expectations calls the professional and able bodied person to view a person with a disability as disabled first, in need of a cure second and perhaps a distant third as a person.

Disability as a Social Construct

I must make a confession. I arrive early to the afternoon session, about 30 minutes early. I sat down and made myself comfortable. I had a clear view of the two people sitting at the front of the room. I had passed the woman (who I later learned was Emma) in the hallway on my way in and we exchanged greetings. I had no idea who she was or what her significance was to this workshop. All I knew coming into this was this guy named Norman that Dr. Neuville seemed to really like was going to talk about disabilities. So, upon seeing Norman, I must confess that I was surprised. I've been to a number of workshops, lectures, conferences, etc. and I've never been as surprised to see who the speaker was as I was with Norman. He had a disability. My immediate reaction (which I pretty much hate myself for) was how is this guy going to talk to us for three hours? I found myself analyzing the situation. I was trying to figure out what Emma's significance was to this situation. I actually thought at one point that she was there as a 'translator' or 'helper' of sorts for Norman. When I found out early in the presentation that they were married, I was shocked. I wasn't happy with my thoughts, but nevertheless...they were there, and I shouldn't ignore them or deny they were there. As time passed and Norman and Emma spoke, my thoughts of "I can't believe they're married" and "he has a disability" changed into "wow, these two are very passionate and knowledgeable" and "hey, that's a good point!" I began to see Norman as a person, not a person with a disability. I think I learned the most at this workshop just by watching their interactions with each other. They challenged every aspect of prior beliefs I had about people with disabilities...just by being there.

- Reflection of workshop participant 2005

In the blink of an eye we assess people we see and pass judgment based on centuries of story, narrative, prejudice and passed down expectations. Humans, all too naturally, judge based on what is perceived as immediately seen. Not taken in to account are a person's life, background, history, upbringing,

experiences, etc. The eye blink has rendered the viewer incapable of seeing the soul of the individual and frequently has hidden that soul even from its owner. It is life giving to allow each person to express himself or herself--who they are, where they come from, what they've been through--before delivering death blows based on lonely presuppositions about others.

Mr. Kunc doesn't consider his life a disability. He wouldn't say he's overcome anything or that he is a brave inspiration. He would claim to be living and enjoying life the best that he can. When Norman said that he did not want to be cured of his disability and had a right to be disabled he raised questions about the value of the culture of cure. Once again the workshop participant was offered an opportunity to better understand the emotional scars of always being seen as in need of cure. The curing agent (human service professional / special education teacher) is required to see Norman's disability as a deficiency that is a deformity. How one must feel about a powerful agent constantly trying to effect a cure by changing ones essence is a view given by Norman's intelligence, depth of knowledge and presence. Mr. Kunc made this point while asserting his right to have cerebral palsy. Given the choice, and it is his choice, he will take no action to alter honored parts of who he is. It is normal to have a disability. Every culture, throughout history, people with disabilities can be found. People with disabilities have a past and will have a future.

Understanding disability as a social construct is the first step toward developing new more healthy stories and life giving narratives. It is difficult for anyone who is able bodied to understand the concept of not trying to cure those with disabilities. It is a basic instinct for people who are able bodied to want to make things better. Mr. Kunc participants that those with a disability may not view help as better.

The fundamental question is, Why does the observer quoted at the beginning of this section first consider Norman's disability and then what he had to say? Participants came to the workshop believing the perspectives they held were positive and ordinary. Participants left the workshop understanding the fundamental negative influence the dominant ideology had on them that guided negative perspectives of people with disability. The surprising realization is that each of the participants considers themselves enlightened students or professionals and discovered that enlightenment is in the eye of the perceiver. It's hard for each participant to realize that society could have such a silent influence on his or her thoughts and actions. Perhaps the surprise and shock of this personal insight will stay with each person and each person will look to the piece of the silent influence that is part of a new reality known as Norman's wisdom and message. The most profound future influence is the memory of Norman's voice and the internalization of voices yet uncountered.

VOICE OF THE PERSON

“He had been screaming out all day and it was 'disturbing the other patients.' When we got to the nursing home, it was suggested he get taken to this certain hospital, which dealt with mental issues. Turns out, he had a broken pelvis”

- reflection of a workshop participant 2005

The right to present and receive consideration of one's desires and opinions is so entirely fundamental that it is often considered foolish to assert. The still and small voice of the student or service recipient is considered fundamental to successful education and service delivery. Stillness is the preferred voice in order to create professional environments that are free from turbulence and do not cause unwelcome commotion. The professional or teacher must concede to the assumed deficiency of each person so that the professional voice can replace the principles of each individual life. The right to receive consideration then is replaced by the principle of “best interest of”. The “best interest of” doctrine calls for a more a valid voice to replace the individuals birth voice. When this is done as a matter of unconscious professional duty the result is an oppressive stillness of birth voice. When the “best interest of” doctrine is applied appropriately it is only humane and just when made use of with emphasis on personal relationship and power balanced structures.

Everyone has a story, and only with open ears and hearts can people's behaviors be understood. Norman and Emma assert that the general message from special education students and human service recipients is; "If you're going to work with

me, you have to listen to me and you can't just listen with your ears. It goes to your head to fast. You have to listen with your whole body I'll stay with you longer and you can truly be a help." Authentic voice, a breaking of the stillness, is an essentially important ingredient each professional requires to have the whole body hearing experience.

The best way to determine what a person needs is to simply ask them. The best way to hear them is to get the helpers self-concept and professionally trained voice out of the way. Unfortunately the helper's self-concept is wrapped in the belief of the incapacity of the previously assessed invalid voice to make decisions. In Norman's experience professionals always seem to think they know a person better than a person knows themselves. The professional's primary source of behavior grows from an economic and professional validation of the simultaneous existence of professional knowing and deficient person not knowing. Thus the curiosity required in hearing the voice of the other is not only absent but specifically discharged as harmful to the professional curative process. Extreme measures are required to undo the nature of centuries of voices sent away. The imbalance of power and the building of intimate relationships must exceed the bounds of moderation as a starting point of necessary extreme measures.

POWER & RELATIONSHIPS (the most fundamental individual professional barrier)

“I knew the students for about a month before the conferences, so I had a good feeling about their personalities. However, it wasn't until I met their parents that I truly understood them. My actions towards each student after those conferences was very different. I was given a view into their lives, and it made me seem them as more of a whole person”

Relationships mean so much, especially in education, which everyone seems to know and few act like they know. "Relationship is the only authentic way to have influence on a behavior" (Norman Kunc, 2005). Anecdotal information that is familiar to the majority validates the truth of the need and power of personal relationship. Professional rhetoric and training has staked their claim to special and superior on making the power of relationship an unwelcome invalid.

The greatest of personal accomplishments is to have made a powerful and positive impact on the life of another. The irony is that the eradication of personal relationship from professional strategies has made holistic health an unattainable Holy Grail. By eliminating the healing power of personal relationship and the requisite ingredient of mutual vulnerability the professional status quo has unwittingly guaranteed the profitability of need in the commodities market. The

difficulty in teaching and serving people with disabilities does not lie within their disability but in the impossible challenge of having a positive impact on the life of the other without benefit of knowing the other.

Perhaps daily strategies will emerge and be developed if each professional seeks balance of power. Each teacher and professional has the power to help a person succeed or to break him or her through powerful comments, gestures, actions, or programs. Making use of professional tools, knowledge and tactics with the force of power balanced relationships causes a behavioral problem to become communication, causes a label to be known as a person and causes non-compliance to become the path to alternate success patterns. In order to make the unconscious power imbalanced process to appear helpful teachers, professionals and parents must give the child up to the force. In many ways the expectation of the non-relational power structures in schools and human services is a more insidious institution than the brick walls of yesterday. Institutions fought against in the 1960s through today can be seen, touched and smelled. The institutional structures present today are operating or proceeding in an inconspicuous or seemingly harmless way but actually with grave effect. Professionals will come to see and smell what is real in the other and the self when they engage the sultry principles of each individual life, feeling, thought and actions which cause regard for individual distinction.

Conclusion

Norman Kunc and Emma Van der Klift spent one day showing a small group of professionals and future teachers a different approach. A life time will be spent understanding what they said, why they feel and how they know. Linking personal development with internalizing the truths of disability as a social construct is a start to creating more pleasing futures. Listening for the voice of the other with a whole body experience is a call to personal transformation. Engaging in symbiotic, power balanced personal relationships illuminates institutional and personal behavior required to wage peace within structures manufactured to rely on conflict carried on by force.