INCHING TOWARD COMMUNITY WORK OR BACK TO THE FUTURE:

SOME LESSONS FROM HISTORY FOR THE ROAD AHEAD

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Pioneer Project and Beyond:

In the late 1980’s a job description for the director of local sheltered workshop appeared under my office door with a note that said: “You should apply for this and see what the real world is like.” I hoped the message was from a student and not from my dean but the position sounded intriguing. Most of the people I asked about it were as skeptical as I was but when I consulted a new faculty member, Pat Rogan, she thought I should do it. Of course, she was from the University of Wisconsin so her response was understandable but I did eventually take her advice and applied for the position. They were desperate enough to hire me so I took a 3-year leave from the university and started a project that turned out to be one of the most meaningful experiences I have ever been involved in. I directed the agency called the Pioneer Center, and Pat headed up the research part, all with the intention of finding jobs for all of the workshop participants, closing the facility, and carefully documenting the entire process. Initially, we made a deal with the local VR and Commission for the Blind agencies to give us some start-up funding to work with some of their clientele as well as Pioneer folks. Later we applied for federal and state supported employment grants to supplement the local funds.
In 1995 Pat and I published a book titled, “Closing the Shop” that described our experiences at Pioneer and included descriptions of three other vocational agencies across the country which had also converted their workshops to completely community work programs. 1995 was a pretty optimistic time. Perhaps like Mark Twain, we were optimists because “it does not seem much use being anything else” but I think both Pat and I felt very confident that, like large residential institutions, sheltered workshops would soon begin closing, replaced by supported community work. At the end of that book we wrote:

“The political and legal groundwork for heightened community employment is already quite solid. What remains is the really hard work of reallocating existing resources and demonstrating individual by individual and community by community, that providing integrated employment options for every person is possible.”

Although we missed a few things, unfortunately this is not too bad a conclusion to defend today as still relevant.

In 2010 Pat and I decided to follow up our 1995 research, revisiting most of the same agencies we included then. Pat, Jean Whitney and I interviewed agency personnel, individuals with disabilities, family members, employers, and agency board members, it was evident that some things had changed but a lot of things hadn’t. Very briefly, agency directors indicated that they were as committed to community work as ever, but emphasized that times were more difficult, that funding mechanisms were changing and shrinking with more targeted timelines and spending limits that were eroding service flexibility. In several cases, these changes were threatening some agencies’ ability to
offer only community employment services. No agency contemplated starting or re-starting a sheltered workshop but several indicated they had no plans to reduce their existing segregated programs, in some cases pointing out that working families wanted choices, more predictable schedules, and more back-up supervision if employment hours were reduced or jobs terminated.

Employers we interviewed had pretty significant histories of employing people with disabilities and supported that idea. They indicated that they curtailed hiring in recent years because of the economy and concerns about having to lay off more employees. When they began rehiring they indicated they focused on rehiring employees who could be flexible so they could hire fewer people and use workers in various ways, minimizing layoffs if the downturn continued. They did not know if people with disabilities could adapt to changing jobs but heard that might be more difficult. Family members we spoke with by and large favored integrated work and did not want their family member spending his/her life in a workshop. Some, however, expressed frustration with the complexity of arranging services and funding so that a person would have a full day’s schedule that was reasonably predictable. Others worried about transportation and safety. A few questioned why the agency could not fund a center where their family member could socialize when not working and maybe enjoy some recreation or skill building groups. People with disabilities were clear about their preferences, whether working for themselves or others, they were satisfied with community work but expressed concerns about their hours and wages.

I am sure many of these findings are familiar to you from your own work and I saw numerous issues that were nearly identical to those raised during the de-institutional
battles of the 1980s and 90s and that we identified in our Closing the Shop book. There are certainly some new variations on old issues and some of the concerns expressed are inevitable products of the recent economic catastrophe, a changing job market, and altered family and community dynamics. We seem to have less time, are paid less, and feel less secure about the future, certainly adding to the complexity of the social change inherent in hiring people who many still regard as “abnormal” in work situations which were designed without them in mind. Despite such uncertainties, no one spoke about returning to a previous time and interviewees still agreed that community work was preferable to segregated work and no one was planning on adding segregated programs. Some, however, saw no reason why people should not have the choice of a segregated program for either a full or partial day if they have nothing else to do.

One red flag that popped out of these findings for me was what appeared to a continuing failure to build stronger community capacity – by that I mean the social resources to assume similar responsibilities for supporting persons with disabilities that are applied to others. Why for example, do employers feel less responsibility to hire a person with a disability during difficult economic times? Why do families expect agency personnel to assume the major responsibility for providing a predictable day schedule, ensuring the safety of adult workers, or providing a separate facility for socializing? Finally, why do transportation issues continue to so significantly impact people’s employment prospects? At what point are we going to focus on building community capacities in which differences are not situated as the individual problem of “abnormal” people but a community characteristic that requires resources to improve things for everyone. I will say more about this later.
Current State of Community Employment:

So here we in 2013 and despite at least verbal support for community inclusion from every branch of the federal government, despite the proven successes of supported/customized employment, over the last three decades, and despite the well-documented preferences of persons with disabilities for community work, sheltered work, sub-minimum wages, and low employment rates continue as if it was still 1995. Moreover, the abysmal employment rates for people with disabilities remain equally unchanged. And we now seem less optimistic than we were 18 years ago and are doing some serious hang-wringing about what we have done wrong and what we could be better. As we wring our hands, we might consider a few historical facts:

1) Segregated work is a well-entrenched societal tradition left over from a disastrous historical period for people with disabilities;

2) Integrated work for persons with intellectual disabilities is a relatively new idea that represents a social revolution in thinking about how we perceive and treat people with disabilities in our society; and

3) Although in some ways, the issues facing persons with disabilities are unique, in some respects they have much in common with other social change movements whose members have been marginalized and restricted at some point in history.
Segregated Work is a Very Old Practice Left Over From a Disastrous Historical Period From Which Persons With Disabilities Have Not Yet Fully Recovered.

Question: Just how old and entrenched is segregated work? Answer: 165 years and counting.

In 1848, Samuel Gridley Howe, Director of the first residential facility in the country for those with blindness and visual impairments proposed to build a similar institution for those he termed “idiots.” In arguing that vocational training should be an integral part of both facilities, Howe offered a defense of segregated vocational training and work that still resonates today. He argued that by providing proper work preparation “no ‘idiot’ need be confined or restrained by force and that the young could be trained to industry, order and self-respect.”

Eugenics Era:

Just how disastrous was this period? A social catastrophe that remains with us in some ways 100 years later. Howe at least felt that some people with disabilities were vocationally salvageable, if carefully trained and monitored, but as the 19th century ended, the climate turned darker. Beginning in earnest during the first decade of the 20th century, and running through World War II the eugenics era began as a strategy to better society through science but ended up as a tragic war against the weak. At its peak, the eugenics movement successfully characterized “feeble minds” as a menacing bio-medical genetically transmitted disease, comprising a primary cause of social pathology and disorder that required individual control, restrictions, and regulation to prevent a national fiscal disaster. Such beliefs were not held by a few cranks, but by the most prominent

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progressives of that era, a list of who’s who of the nation’s intellectuals, scientists, judges, social activists, and politicians such as Oliver Wendell Homes, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Margaret Sanger Theodore Roosevelt, all of whom professed to be making better citizens and improving society scientifically.

During this period people considered defective were stripped of their citizenship rights to marry, vote, and/or own property. It was estimated that 60,000 “defective” people were coercively sterilized in the U.S. some as late as the early 1980s. The vast majority of coerced sterilizations occurred after the notorious 1927 Buck v. Bell decision in which Chief Supreme Court Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, declared that: “Three generations of imbeciles are enough,” referring to the right of the State of Virginia to involuntary sterilize a seventeen-year old, pregnant Caucasian woman named Carrie Buck, who like her mother, was admitted to the Virginia Colony of Epileptics and Feebleminded and gave birth to an allegedly mentally deficient daughter, Vivian. All three were certified to have “inherited feeblemindedness” but later evidence indicted that none of these women were cognitively deficient.

Institutions for “defectives” were built in every state. At its peak in 1955, 554,000, people labeled as mentally ill were in state facilities. The peak year for people considered mentally deficient was 1967 when about 200,000 people were institutionalized.

Beginning in the late 1960s, institutional enrollments began to gradually decline, decelerating dramatically through the 1980s and 1990s until presently nine states including the District of Columbia have no institutions for persons with intellectual disabilities.

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The eugenic era spawned what I refer to as a legacy of deficiency which I define as a set of well entrenched devaluing beliefs about persons with disabilities left over from an earlier era from which this group has not yet fully recovered. As implied, this legacy continues sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtlety, contributing to our ongoing marginalization and continuing ambivalence toward persons with intellectual disabilities and their place in society. It may surprise many for example to learn that today more than 30,000 people still reside in state institutions for persons with intellectual disabilities and another 30,000 have been placed in nursing homes. In fact, states vary dramatically in the extent to which they support de-institutionalization. Between 1996 and 2000, all states except Missouri and North Dakota reduced their institutional populations, some states by as much as 86%, others by less than 15%. Even though by 2012 eleven states had closed all of their state institutions for persons with intellectual disabilities, 13 states have closed none. In some states, based solely on the developmental disability label, persons may still be restricted from voting, marrying, and/or parenting. Involuntary sterilization, though rarely applied, remains a legal option in some locations.

We also see that the legacy of deficiency operates in the employment realm. Although about fourteen percent of the total U.S. working population is comprised of persons with disabilities, most are unemployed and many are out of the work force totally and living well below the poverty line. Estimates of their average rate of unemployment hovers around 40% as opposed to 25% for the general population. Those with intellectual and developmental disabilities continuing to fare even worse with an integrated employment rate hovering around 15%. According to data from the Institute for Community Inclusion
at UMass-Boston, about 625,000 individuals work in segregated facilities earning sub-minimum wage. Movement from segregated to community work is less than 2%.

The National Disability Rights Network in their 2012 report titled “Segregated and Exploited” (which I would highly recommend for all) termed our current system of vocational services for persons with disabilities a “disaster.” Citing ongoing, disgraceful employment rates, the disproportionate levels of poverty and dependence, the tangle of contradictory federal and state laws, policies, and practices, continuing funding inequalities and inadequacies, the blatant neglect of compliance requirements, and the insufficient and inept execution of education, community transition, and vocational rehabilitation programs, the NDRN has charged that the most generous funding for segregated work and sub-minimal wages come from federal and state agencies, each of which profess to believe unequivocally in community inclusion and full access to competitive work.

Interestingly, after carefully outlining some of these issues and proposing a long list of insightful remedies, the Disability Network went on to suggest that the real problems in securing employment equality are not just technical or legal, but a lack of national will caused by the legacy of deficiency from a by-gone era. According to this group:

“Segregated work continues to be defended by the historical belief that it is ok to segregate and isolate people with disabilities even in today’s society because most people don’t think there is another way. We have forgotten that just 30 years ago no one believed there was another option for people with disabilities but to live in large, state-run institutions. The belief was they could never care for themselves, were too vulnerable
or made people too uncomfortable to live in typical communities. But soon we saw these
human warehouses for what they were and in state after state institutions closed, and
now millions of people with disabilities are living, successfully, in their communities.”

The Network is referring here of course, to the eugenics era and arguing that its effects
can be successfully combated if we have the collective will to do so.

**Laws Are Necessary But Insufficient To Achieve Employment Equity**

From the late 1960s through the 1990s, the weapon of choice to combat the worst
injustices of the eugenic period were legal, leading eventually to passage of the 1990
Americans With Disabilities Act, landmark legislation that is considered the civil rights
bill for people with disabilities. Following such legal successes, it is logical to assume
that employment equity can be achieved in a similar fashion and understandable why
opponents of sheltered work have heralded the recent U.S. Department of Justice use of
the ADA and the Olmstead ruling to challenge segregated work in Oregon, Virginia,
Rhode Island, and Mississippi.

Unfortunately, thus far the ADA has proved rather disappointing in advancing the cause
of employment access and compliance for individuals with intellectual disabilities. While
Olmstead has affirmed that unnecessary segregation of people with disabilities is
discriminatory and that public entities must provide community services, there are
important conditions attached to this ruling, namely that such services must be deemed
appropriate, meaning that an individual must be determined to be able to handle and
benefit from community settings.
Embedded in our legal analyses and reflected in even such landmark legislation as the ADA, are the legacy of deficiency and continuing ambivalence that still divides us as normal or abnormal, competent or incompetent. Olmstead notes that there are “abnormal” people who according to designated experts need segregation which can be considered “least restrictive” because some are inappropriate for, or unable to benefit from, community settings until they are properly rehabilitated. If you think this sounds exactly like a rationale for segregated readiness programs and sub-minimum wages you are right.

Under the ADA, unlike cases involving women and people of color, social segregation of persons with disabilities is not itself considered prejudicial. Deciding whether or not an individual rightfully belongs in a segregated program does not challenge the existence of the workshop but only who is appropriate for it.

Another reason the ADA has been disappointing stems not so much from the law itself but the way it has been interpreted and applied by this Supreme Court. A continuing obstacle to community employment for many is the tendency of employers to emphasize physical accommodations and fail to offer less familiar job modifications like revising workplace instruction and supervision, re-arranging job tasks, and/or offering additional work supports. So even when people typically considered disabled are deemed to be “appropriate” for community work they often face serious obstacles in trying to successfully negotiate work situations that were designed without them in mind (Minow, 1990).

In addition, this Supreme Court has severely restricted who qualifies as “disabled” under the law so that when disability cases arise, again unlike litigation involving gender and
race that have focused on discrimination issues, the Court tends to focus on whether plaintiffs meet the disability definition and are even eligible for protection under the law (Carey, 2009). Consider the interesting case of Littleton v. Walmart, involving a young man with a long record of intellectual disability, including attending special education programs, receiving Social Security disability benefits and qualifying for vocational rehabilitation services. Mr. Littleton applied for a job pushing carts and requested that a vocational specialist accompany him to the interview to assist him in answering questions. Initially, the employer agreed but at the time of the meeting rescinded the offer and decided against hiring the applicant. A lawsuit followed charging that Walmart had failed to offer reasonable accommodations in the hiring process and therefore denied this applicant equal opportunity. The case was decided not on the basis of whether reasonable accommodations were warranted and hiring discrimination occurred but on the basis of whether the person’s impairment was considered sufficient ‘to substantially limit a major life activity.’ All the testimony pointed to how qualified he was as evidenced by how well he performed in numerous other jobs and community situations. The court ruled that he did not meet the definition of disability and therefore did not qualify for protection under the law.

So here is a man who by most standards would be considered disabled based on his history and record, and therefore eligible for protection and reasonable accommodations under the law. Yet the Court ruled that he is “too qualified” to be considered disabled. The good news is that a person generally considered disabled is judged to be highly competent. The bad news is that competency is held against him since apparently, one cannot be both disabled and qualified. You must be one or the other. Ironically, if the
individual had been considered legally disabled, he would have been protected, but to do so would have required a focus on how deficient and impaired he was, stigmatizing him further and making it more unlikely he would have been hired. Being too impaired to satisfactorily participate in the workplace’s hiring process without assistance, but not sufficiently so to be eligible for reasonable accommodations, he is situated squarely as the primary problem as opposed to the work setting, perpetuating the legacy of deficiency that the law was supposed to address.

As noted legal scholars, Martha Minow and Allison Carey, argue, as long as legal decisions continue to divide people as either normal or abnormal but do not assure that there are sufficient conditions within the community to enable people who have real differences to succeed, the legacy of deficiency will continue situating dysfunction in the individual and justifying segregated work and preparation for some. So on one hand, for those judged to be truly disabled under the law, workshops are considered “needed” and “least restrictive.” On the other hand, people considered appropriate for community work may escape segregation initially but risk new forms of exclusion because they fail to receive the assistance they need to succeed in workplaces that do not adequately account for their real difference. In either case, this Court appears to have little inclination to emphasize discrimination issues in disability cases or push our society from without to be more inclusive which is why, while I applaud the DOJ lawsuits, I remain pessimistic that they will achieve the degree of change anticipated; specifically that: a) they will find segregated work discriminatory; and b) even if they do, this ruling by itself will prove insufficient to achieve employment equity. But who am I to argue with the DOJ and
hopefully, I am wrong. Whether I am right or not, there are additional strategies that we can pursue to advance the cause of employment equity from inside.

**Employment Equity Encompasses More Than Workshop Closure And Is Part Of A Larger Social Movement**

Since employment equity represents a social revolution in thinking about the place of people with disabilities in our society, we should look to other social movement for productive social change ideas and strategies. In some ways, the issues facing persons with disabilities are unique, but in some ways they have much in common with other groups who at some point have also been marginalized and discriminated against. Historically, women, people of color, and gays and lesbians have been characterized as deficient, e. g. too intellectually and/or emotionally unqualified, personally indifferent, and/or morally unworthy to be granted their basic rights of citizenship. Each group, has achieved some success by redefining themselves and re-framing how the issues they face are portrayed. Moreover, whatever progress these groups have made accrued largely because they have persisted in speaking out loudly and often, have developed sophisticated lobbying efforts and organizations and are relentless in the political arena pursuing their goals. As Carey points out, one’s rights are relational and negotiable. They are always measured against someone else’s rights. They are rarely given and must be claimed and defended.
Successful Social Movements Require Strong and Persistent Voices From Inside and Outside the Movement.

Self-advocacy and activism are not entirely new activities for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities, but pale in intensity and influence with those of other groups. In regard to segregated employment this seems especially true where professional self-interest and family concerns often prevail. When, however, people with disabilities have spoken publically about their own experiences and described their perspectives, they have proven to be very influential and effective in changing minds, laws, policies and practices over the years, whether it was testifying before Congressional committees during the era of de-institutionalization lawsuits or publically speaking out and demonstrating in favor of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and later for the ADA. In addition, they have developed sustained and effective national and state groups such as Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE) and Speaking Up For Us (SUFU) and conducted conferences focusing on self-determination, all of which has heightened their visibility as involved citizens acting in their own behalf.

In order to begin reversing the legacy of deficiency and reframing the issues obstructing employment equity, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities must continue to actively offer their own perspectives and advocate on their own behalf just as vigorously as they did in 1970 and 1990. Only by voicing their views can formerly marginalized people begin to reverse the negative discourse and imagery around them and present their own unique perspectives: According to Martha Minow:
“Shifting to the standpoint of a historically marginalized person can reveal truths obscured by the dominant view. Making this shift may be disorienting or irritating but . . . opening up to another point of view at least entertains the possibility that our prior categories and assumptions need revision . . . [and] allow us to see how we are all different from one another and how we are all the same . . . (It also reveals) how reality all depends on how we look at it and reflects our own partiality.

Self-advocates face other difficult challenges. As with other social movements there are numerous voices claiming to represent them in defining their problems and determining solutions. These may be professionals, family members, politicians, or researchers, diluting or changing their message and opening doubts about who “really” reflects the “true views” of this group. In addition, many continue to doubt the ability of self-advocates to adequately organize themselves, competently represent their views and sustain their efforts and momentum for the long term. We do know that many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are very disempowered and may be either so discouraged or isolated that expressing their frustrations and/or aspirations is not even an option. So how will they be included? And who will do this kind of organized outreach? These are valid questions for any movement so whether or not the self-advocacy movement can be an effective force for change in the employment arena is still an open question. It should be remembered, however, that self-advocacy has already started and has inspired a growing number of people with disabilities in nearly every state to begin speaking and acting for themselves. Cesar Chavez, once an undereducated migrant worker and part of small, dedicated and courageous group who went on to successfully
organize and secure better working conditions and pay for other migrants, once described
the powerful momentum that is unleashed by fledgling social change:

“Once social change begins it can’t be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who
has learned to read; or humiliate the person who feels pride; or oppress the person who
is not afraid anymore.”

Like other social movements seeking the kind and level of change represented here self-
advocates will likely attract additional support and hopefully benefit by expanding
themselves from a primarily “self-focused” effort to that of “collectively-focused” entity,
affiliating with other organizations and coalitions that will broaden its audience and
message but not dilute either. Allies here may include like-minded families, and other
groups of people representing other disability factions, older citizens and coalitions of
people who have experienced similar histories of prejudice, marginalization and
discrimination. Developing such coalitions may be helpful both in re-framing the issues,
discourse, and images away from what people “need” to what they want, away from what
individuals can do to what like-minded collectives can offer, and away from what a
rights-focus can do to what a community-focus can provide.

One question that frequently arises is what is the role of the human services regarding
self-advocacy? Clearly, groups such as those committed to the views of SABE and other
self-advocacy groups can offer consistent, influential voices to this effort. Moreover,
thoughtful, collaborative inclusive professional services and supports will likely be an
important piece in moving the integrated employment agenda forward. Conversely, we
cannot ignore the historical reality that professionalized services are themselves complex
and powerful, have a continuing need for clientele and re-invention, and contain inconsistencies and interests that can create, sustain, and perpetuate the very conditions they claim to be alleviating. Through federal and state policies, funding priorities and mechanisms, quality assurance measures and host of other sources, community inclusion, self-determination, and community work, are concepts that have been claimed, defined, and applied in ways that have not always been helpful for achieving employment equity.

Given the legacy of deficiency that has historically plagued them, it seems critical that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, continue to forcefully speak up, well, and often on their own behalf to ensure that the stories told about them are their own. Burton Blatt once called segregation of people with intellectual disabilities “an invented treatment for an invented disease based on stories about a large group of people that were largely untrue.” Perhaps a critical question for the future, is who will be the employment storytellers?

**Successful Social Change Requires that Society Eventually Develops New Community Capacities Top Support Its Changing Beliefs, Laws, and Institutions.**

We now say we are moving away from a bio-medical perspective toward disability with its emphasis on individual defect and expert control and toward policies, services, and proposals that are “inclusive” and self-determined implying that they are woven into the surrounding social fabric. If the current emphasis is on supporting people’s preferences, assets, and participation by building community capacities for expanded diversity, it is indeed a dramatic departure from the past. Assuming that human difference is not “the private, internal problem of each individual,” necessitating specialized treatments, but a
pervasive feature of communal life, requires that we adopt a strong and underlying presumption of human commonality,” even for those we consider so different that (as Phil Ferguson put it) “culture seems beside the point.” Certainly assuring people’s rights, creating new and innovative social services, and changing larger social systems will continue to be an important piece of what is required. But we no longer hold the illusion that community inclusion is relatively straightforward, primarily legal and technical, involving lawsuits, agency reorganizations, and/or more professional proficiency. If inclusion and heightened empowerment means working with people to become integral participants within the groups, activities and associations they choose, the rights, services, and systems changes will be necessary but insufficient to achieve success. Expanding employment in a work culture that was invented and operates largely without people with intellectual disabilities in mind will require that we forge new community relationships and activities based on the assumption that everyone belongs; that inclusion is everyone’s business and is something we all do to one degree or another in our lives across settings and people.

We have made a promising start by developing new ways of thinking about how to better relate to the employment community through more collaborative, individualized job development methods and sophisticated work supports, funding, and accommodations, benefiting both employee and employer by tapping into people’s strengths and conditions for success. But building community resources for employment equity also demands more from each of us as individual citizens. Community building requires that we act not only in our professional roles but also in our work within our communities as individual citizens in whatever capacity we can. In addition, to being professionals, or family
members we are also customers, patients, relatives, neighbors, church members, and volunteers. We are all connected to others and can influence our fellow citizens to widen their vision of community to include a broader array of people, promoting the idea that are all different in many respects but the same in many others that matter. More importantly, emphasizing that difference is a characteristic of community life also means explaining and demonstrating that including people, even those we formerly excluded, is far less alien than we might imagine. We often hear that building a ramp to enhance accessibility for an employee using wheelchairs also helps many others, from older folks to less mobile and baby carriage-pushing employers and customers. Assisting people to complete an interview, altering a work schedule and/or allowing for more training time and/or work instruction are also things that enhance the work performance of a wide circle of applicants and employees, are actions we take in numerous forms as part of what good supervisors and employers do routinely, and as such are ultimately beneficial to workplace morale, efficiency, and production. So building community resources is not only proposing accommodations for an employee with a disability but demonstrating how such adaptations are or can be part of one’s regular routine. Using such an analysis changes the equation from viewing people as either the same or different, abnormal or normal, competent or incompetent, to seeing everyone as different and accommodations as normal. An applicant who is considered different and requiring unfamiliar considerations or supports within work situations that were designed w/o them in mind may unnerve an employer causing him or her to exclude an applicant whose differences seem insurmountable. And that is true unless he or she understands that recognizing people’s strengths and conditions for success and making situational adjustments of this
kind are quite familiar and beneficial to us, made routinely in a wide variety of situations with the wide array of people that surround us. In this way, we are building the capacity of our communities to change in Minow’s words from “focusing on the abnormal person to “making ALL the difference.”

People may say, “We are already doing this.” And perhaps we are. But if the recent follow-up research Pat, Jean, and I did is accurate, we still depend largely on human/vocational services organizations to solve issues that we all should be undertaking as citizens because we are all different, and since inclusion involves and benefits us all, it should be everyone’s business. As far as human service organizations go, we need to ask ourselves if we are facilitating more community responsibility or prefer to assume such responsibilities as a way to expand our activities and clientele? Whether we do or not, merely asking this question has value.” Socrates once said, “Let him that would move the world, first move himself.” If change begins with us we must continually ask ourselves these kinds of questions and hope that we are honest enough to answer ourselves honestly.

People may also ask “How is community building going to help achieve employment equity? Aren’t we aiming far too low and doing far too little? Perhaps so, but doing well whatever you can despite how miniscule it may seem beats trying to do too much badly. In this regard, Albert Einstein argued that high aspirations always begin with little steps: “If I wish to do something great and wonderful, I must start by doing the little things as if they were great and wonderful.”
Since the 1960s people with intellectual disabilities have come a long way through great adversity. Achieving employment equity is a hard fight in light of 165 years of segregated work and a lingering legacy of deficiency. Certainly, the challenges ahead seem daunting, in a culture that reifies intelligence and individualism as the predominant determinants of success, where more of us are “bowling alone,” and where we continue to see a world divided between the fit and the unfit, the deserving and undeserving, the makers and the takers. But we should remember that achieving employment equity is a hard fight for other groups as well. The Civil Rights bill was passed in 1964, yet people of color who still struggle against inequality in hiring, pay and opportunity. The same goes for women who gained suffrage in 1920 and since then until 1972 failed to secure an equal rights amendment. When it finally passed, it was never ratified. Yet following that devastating defeat, women have submitted a new bill every year since then and have never flagged in their pursuit of employment equality. In both instances even extensive legal challenges have not yet resolved such controversial issues as affirmative action, equal pay for equal work, access to non traditional careers, etc. If disability history and other social movements are accurate barometers, we are in for a long struggle and should expect continuing setbacks and resistance as well as triumphs and progress. It will require continuing persistence and broadened approaches to doing well whatever we can as professionals and citizens from within and from without. As an important social movement much is at stake and going back is not an option so if inching along is all we do for the moment, lets continue to inch along in the near term but never fail to be regularly pushing the pace of change for the long term.
Thank you and all the best in the next few days at this conference and in your important future work.