

## John McKnight and the Fallible Community

(excerpts from On the Road Update)

Jack Yates

### Introduction to Jack Yates and the “On the road update” series

In the next few issues of the SRV journal, we will be publishing excerpts from a series of essays written by Jack Yates from 1988 onward on his experiences and reflections as a PASS, normalization and SRV trainer. Jack Yates mostly works out of Massachusetts but is well known in many SRV, PASS and PASSING circles because of his extensive experiences as a leader in the field for approximately 20 years. This first installment of the “On the road update” series (from May 1, 1988) concerns itself with John McKnight and his teachings about community. Thus with Jack Yates we meet with John McKnight, and then Jack offers a critique of John McKnight’s idea of community called “the fallible community.”

### On John McKnight

When Jack Pealer invited me to the first annual retreat of the Ohio Safeguards membership, I went. First, because I was flattered to be invited: Jack had come to our first two (almost) annual retreats in eastern New England, and I wanted to be able to reciprocate. Second, because I love retreats. I have stated the purpose of our retreats as reflection and solidarity, and I guess I love those occasions in which those purposes are explicit. PASS teams and planning days and all sorts of other things I like to spend time in, but retreats (secular; I haven’t been on any religious retreats) I look forward to the most. And the third reason I said yes to Jack was most important: the retreat leader was John McKnight, and I wanted to be in a room with him again, especially in a context which was deeper than a short lecture. I am not going to try to summarize or interpret what John McKnight had to say while I listened in Columbus. I will write as if all of you have heard and taken seriously what he is saying to us. Any readers who have not read or listened well to McKnight should please do so as soon as you can. The line of thought which he has introduced to us over the past few years is very disturbing—in other words, very renewing. But what I’m going to write about here is the experience of the retreat, not the content of McKnight’s contribution to it. And after a few impressions of the retreat, I will be writing a little informal paper called “The Fallible Community,” based on some conversations Michael Kendrick and I have had about McKnight’s role in our thinking.

McKnight spoke for about two hours that Tuesday night, and then the retreat itself began at noon on Wednesday. Nearly all of the fifteen retreat participants attended the lecture in the conservatory, so that opening served as a foundation presentation. In the lecture, I noted two tendencies which John McKnight has in common with Wolf Wolfensberger. First, fairly frequently he uses sustained sarcasm as a tool not only to explicate but to provoke, to needle (his target and his audience). And second, although he structured his presentation so that the first half was about what is wrong with our society and the second half was about his proposed response (“the community way”), the second section showed that it was impossible for him that evening to refrain for more than a few minutes from critique. Response reverted repeatedly to criticism. As I listen to McKnight, again and again I think, “so the problem is deeper than I thought.” Signs of our times.

At the retreat, one thing I appreciated greatly was McKnight’s willingness to present. He announced from the beginning that he would speak about community organizing, which is what he knew about, and the “what does this mean to me,” he said “I leave this up to you.” So that afternoon and the following morning there were some periods of good, serious discussion among the group of participants, but for most of the formal time together John McKnight presented to us, more like a workshop than a retreat, which was fine with me. Given his often-repeated story about “you can only learn what you already

know,” I was afraid McKnight might be unwilling to say much, but the presentation was clearly outlined and sequenced, lacking only an overhead projector to be a Training Institute style lecture. I guess it is respectful of a teacher to teach as if his students already know something; but I think it is also respectful of a teacher to teach as if his students can indeed learn something they don't already know.

The primary purpose of the Ohio Safeguards retreat, at least in its first year, was solidarity, so reflection was not really invited in its structure. The two things can, I imagine, pull against one another often. So the dynamic which Wolf calls “Fleeing from solitude” was very much in evidence and not much overcome. No evening session was scheduled, so after supper together some participants turned on the radio and played cards. Some of you know how much of a Puritan I am in some of our minor controversies about PASS workshops, so you will have guessed that I didn't join the card-players. At about nine I went to the kitchen where (I should have predicted it) McKnight and about five other participants were talking around the table.

A great conversation! About community, and about communities. Jack Pealer opened the retreat by asking each participant to locate on a big wall-map of Ohio (drawn freehand by Pealer) where they are from. I felt a bit left-out, as the only person from out-of-state, and I had to climb on the couch and point to a spot high on the wall to indicate Brockton (Massachusetts). McKnight went last, and in addition to waving toward Chicago he told us that he had grown up living in several cities and towns in Ohio. The kitchen table conversation, then, was not only about “community” as a misty concept (quality, vision, nostalgia, goal, feeling, anchor), but also as a spot on a map, a place on earth, as home. People spoke about rural cemeteries, family cemeteries, one-room schools, the industrialization of farming, the abandonment of Akron by Goodyear and Firestone, voluntary associations past and present, who are the real community leaders, community organizing and movement organizing, the founding of Chicago, Gary and Lowell as company towns. When others had gone to bed, McKnight and I continued to talk, as I remembered Wolf's advice long ago: if you find yourself in the presence of a person with elements of greatness, without making a pest of yourself, try to latch onto her or him and learn all you can. I asked McKnight how he had gotten in contact with people in the field of mental retardation, since that was not at all part of his background but was a major use of his time the past few years or less. The contact, it seems, began with correspondence with John O'Brien and David Truran in Atlanta as early as 1977, then with meeting Betty O'Berry and Tom Kohler of Georgia Advocacy Office (GAO) at a conference on “Democracy in America” in 1982. I was even more intrigued to find out why, given his views on human services, McKnight keeps saying “yes” to invitations from people in the field of mental retardation (MR). It took me until nearly two a.m. to work up the nerve to ask, but this is about what he said.

John said that the people at GAO were the first people in any human services that he felt comfortable with, and that as he looked at the MR field he saw many sources of hope. One good sign is the amazing amount of quite fundamental change which the field has seen in a very short time. In the 15 years that a few of us have been around, almost a total change in basic patterns of service delivery, and in thinking about our work, and in what seems worthwhile to argue about, has taken place. So, even if current directions are not all good ones, at least there is evidence of openness.

Sources of this openness, sources of this fundamental change, and sources of hope for the future come, John proposed, from who are, and who we are not, the key constituencies or power blocs in the field of MR. First, there is almost no important contact in our field with universities, and that is among our great strengths in his view. John said he has great respect for scholarship, but sees great harm in the “imperial” university, in grant-grabbing and in alliance with big business and big government, and especially in the professionalization of community. Other human service fields have close alliance with the imperial university: mental health, corrections, most obviously in medicine, even in special education, but not so much in mental retardation, and that is a source of hope.

And our field, much more than the other human service fields, is lucky enough to have some real

constituency other than professionals. For decades, a second powerful constituency has been parents of retarded people, and that is a great source of hope. Very recently there has begun the growth of power and standing for a second non-staff constituency, people who are themselves labelled mentally retarded, and that is a great source of hope. And there may be possibly the development of a third non-staff constituency: citizens who are not retarded and not family and not staff, but who are interested in the full participation of retarded citizens in their communities. The creation of that constituency will come almost entirely from the personal introduction of individuals to one another, individuals who are not retarded with individuals who are, McKnight feels; and his very real hope for the creation of that constituency by all of our efforts is the reason John keeps saying "yes" to our invitations.

### **The Fallible Community**

Most sectors of the normalization training movement over the past few years have seen the growing influence of the ideas of John McKnight concerning community and the role of human services. Wolf Wolfensberger, especially in TIPS (Training Institute Publication Series) has shared some of McKnight's insights with us since about 1980, and soon after that the Georgia Advocacy Office began the series of invitations to McKnight to address audiences in the field of mental retardation, a series which has grown tremendously in the past two years (1986-1988). The opportunity for people interested in normalization training to read and especially listen to John McKnight seems to be part of, and a catalyst for, an important evolution in what preoccupies normalization training and thinking in our circles.

One manifestation of this evolution is in what the typical PASS team spends most of its time and best energy in talking about. For the first five years or so that PASS teams existed, both in training workshops and in invited assessments, much of the team's best energy would tend to go into specific recommendations made within the overall model for service delivery which was already in practice. Rating by rating, the team would try to come up with some recommendations which would improve service quality at the group home, the sheltered workshop, etc. In the late 1970s and early 80s, however, most PASS teams of my acquaintance began to put more of their best energy into proposing alternative models for service delivery, no longer accepting the group home or the sheltered workshop as a given. A team in Massachusetts led by Jack Pealer in 1982 expressed this most clearly by saying at the climax of its verbal assessment summary, "So, you have to stop what you're doing, and do something else." Teams moved in this direction for reasons of structure: O'Brien led practitioners to begin PASS conciliation with a discussion of people's needs and of what it would take to meet those needs, and discussion of ratings is always preceded by some form of foundation discussion. And teams moved in this direction for reasons of new collective understandings: we began to see that many of the specific recommendations we were proposing were futile if more fundamental changes of model did not occur. Particular PASS team's conversations reached conceptual impasse.

People interested in normalization training began several years ago to feel another conceptual impasse in turn. Teams began to recognize that proposing the best of human service structures would not necessarily bring major change in the situation of many service consumers who were alone and friendless. Some of the best energy of PASS teams became more likely to go into the exploration of people's life situations than to go into the analysis of and proposals for service delivery; and the energy for recommendations began to more often flow into suggestions for building personal connections for the people we serve. Teams moved in this direction for reasons of structure: Wolfensberger led training workshops of all types to be founded on some understanding of and identification with the "wounds" that people have suffered, and soon after that, PASS and PASSING conciliations would begin by lengthy discussions of the situations of people's lives. And teams moved in this direction for reasons of new collective understandings, in recognition of what even ideal service quality could not get you. Into this third, and current, phase has come the influence of McKnight. Our receptivity to his ideas seems thus far to be uneven in a certain way, and it is this unevenness which prompted the conversations

with Michael Kendrick and others leading to this paper.

Receptivity has been higher, I believe, to the “proposal” aspects of McKnight’s teaching, than to the analytical aspects. The proposals for connecting people or reconnecting people to the associational life of their communities have enriched the directions which had been put forth especially by normalization trainers connected with Citizen Advocacy, and they fit well into the search by PASS teams for ways beyond the impasse described above. Beth Mount has described her disappointment that socially integrative participation is represented in PASS by just one big rating, contrasted with the way in which physical integration and image issues are broken down explicitly into several ratings to give us tactics for recommendations; perhaps McKnight (and many others including Doody and Mount and Lenk) are helping us to elaborate and specify the concrete directions in which we might help people pursue community participation. The proposals which we might develop from the work of John McKnight will be extremely fruitful for our training and for our communities.

In addition to implying proposals, McKnight’s ideas offer analysis of some of what is wrong with our society. Modernity, as well as human service systems, seems to take quite a beating in this analysis. It is this fundamental critique which especially links McKnight to much of what Wolfensberger has been saying to us for many years, and it is probably not only coincidental that McKnight’s critique is perhaps not as influential in our circles as his implied proposals. Kendrick has pointed out that there may be an understandable yearning among normalization trainers as well as listeners to seek mentors who offer us more comfort than Wolf, someone whose advice seems more satisfying and less austere. Our yearning for reassurance carries within it the potential to misunderstand John McKnight and to misunderstand community.

To avoid misunderstanding we need to overcome the temptation to romanticize and to utopianize. The ways people sometimes romanticize community include a number of “if only...” formulations of wishful thinking: if only we all lived in small towns (like Reedsburg, Wisconsin, or Lake Wobegon), if only we lived 50 years ago (or in the middle ages), if only human services had never been created, if only people were given money to buy their own services, if only each of us would go get a job outside human services (where presumably we would not be complicit in oppression). We fall into romanticizing the insight which service recipients should have into service quality, and we fall into romanticizing the natural acceptance which people should have for each other if human services were not in the way. Jean Vanier wrote that “you cannot make a real commitment to community until you’ve been disillusioned by it.” It is hard for most of us in the normalization training movement to fall into romanticizing personal relationships, since most of us are or have been married; but the temptation to romanticize community remains strong, perhaps partly because many of us have little experience with its creation and disillusion. When arranging for community still does not bring fulfillment, still does not meet people’s needs, will it be discarded? When we found, in one trainer’s words, that it was not enough to work toward a person’s being “perfectly well served,” we might be tempted to substitute the goal that a person should be “perfectly well loved.” But when we find that a person (any person) cannot be perfectly well loved, that even as a goal that phrase is a bit foolish, I hope we will overcome our disillusionment and make a commitment to the goal that each person might be loved—just loved. John McKnight spoke in Holyoke of the dangers of utopianism, of the belief that perfection should be sought by control, through systems and institutions and societies. Instead of “control, so things will go right,” he said our goal should be the place where “fallibility reigns,” the community, “the spaces in society where we know things won’t go right.” He said that “community is the sum of our fallibilities, our capacities, and our possibilities,” rather than of our deficiencies and our perfectibilities. In community, he said, “there are no people who are ‘handicapped,’ there are only fallible people, and their fallibilities vary.” Our goal should not be the perfection of community, or perfection through community, but should be community itself.

Some of our temptation to romanticize community may come from sort of an unconscious drive or wish

to “fix” things. I think normalization-oriented people are unlikely to want to “fix” the person with impairment; we see that this line of thinking is at best futile and at worst a form of blaming the victim. But we may be prey to setting as our goal the “fixing” of the situation around the person. Institutions were a bad approach, so we hoped that deinstitutionalization and group homes would “fix” the situation. We found that congregative situations like sheltered workshops were futile, so we hoped that de-congregation of programs would “fix” the situation. Now we find that better program models don’t “fix” loneliness, so we hope that friends and associational membership will. We will find now that friends, associations, and community will not “fix” the situation either. The problem is not that mental retardation cannot be cured; the problem is that life cannot be cured, the community is fallible. And we need to remember that community, like the other things we have been tempted to romanticize, cannot be judged by whether it “fixes” people or situations; like de-congregation and like associations and like friends, and maybe like life, community is worthwhile for other reasons.

So if community isn’t Utopia and won’t fix people and won’t resolve people’s situation in life, then what is it good for? To paraphrase McKnight, it’s the only uncontrolled space, the only place you can sing together and the only place you can die together, the only place we can never abolish suffering, and the only place we can never abolish joy. The fallible community.

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