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**Title: Creating The Right Conditions For
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Personalized Initiatives For “Small” People***

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The modern service systems have become strikingly large, complex, technocratic, dominating and swept up in agendas and pressures that often have little to do with the founding purposes of services. Yet, we are still asked to have faith that these systems have not lost their moorings and can be reliably trusted to be exquisitely attentive to the needs of people who often may be inarticulate, powerless and acutely vulnerable in their dependency on others.

It is only reasonable to wonder whether such impersonal and corporate systems ought to be the instruments of choice for supporting the lives of many people. It would seem persuasive that there optimally should be a symmetry between the "*modus operandi*" of the methods of nurture of people and character and needs of those persons who hope to draw their support and sustenance from it. Much as in the broader world of nature, flora and fauna only do well in certain environments, and may perish if these habitats degrade or disappear. Obviously, there may be an "ecology of thriving" that relates to human beings that we ought not to ignore.

While our formal service language and aspirations often capture this intuition e.g. "person/people centered individualised supports", it would seem that there must logically be better and worse *means* to achieve these *ends*. Put another way, there must be environments that are notably more "person centered" than others. Further, it would seem probable that the ingredients that compose and enliven these better environments could be unearthed, characterized and distinguished from ingredients that might be thought of as "person unfriendly" or even "person toxic" in the extreme. In both instances, the discriminating litmus test would be whether people thrive, in what dimensions of their lives and to what degree.

It is obvious that this is an eminently researchable empirical question, providing the issue is clearly enough framed. Our present corporate ethos service systems are often asked to uphold and provide person centered outcomes on the crucially suspect premise that they are already suitably constituted to do pretty much anything we ask them. Consequently, the very entities that may have historically brought us "less-than-person-centered" results are then mobilized and relied on to do something they have never previously acquitted themselves on. This is a dramatic illustration of the error of changing goals, but leaving the *means* intact and unmodified. It is no wonder then that there is so much disappointment with the outcomes when we simply do the same old thing, but have it wrapped up in new rhetoric. Anyone who has seen what bureaucracies do to the process of individualized planning and service design, when implemented "*en masse*", will have witnessed this divergence of practice and stated intent and what it brings for people.

It would be quite wrong to attribute a malevolence to the corporate systems for their failure to be something they are not. The more key mistake is ours when we persuade ourselves that we must simply make the best of any service system that is available. It is at that point that we try to derive apples from oranges rather than to face the reality that oranges require their own strategies of cultivation. It is no wonder that we frequently fail in our attempts to graft person centered seedlings onto roots that have more in common with managing large corporations than attending to the details of the lives of “small” people.

A better approach, that is often pursued quite successfully, is to simply create person centered solutions in the way that they appear to need to be created “on the ground”, and then subsequently adjust the relationship with formalized service systems to reflect these new pre-conditions and parameters, and thereby bring such systems into a more appropriately helpful role. In other words, to deliberately alter the approach taken to achieve person centered outcomes so that the people supported are the starting point for evolving method rather than simply recapitulating pre-existent technocratic ways of operating. After all, what could be more coherent than to use people centered methods to achieve people centered solutions.

If one finds oneself momentarily baffled as to what these crucial active person centered ingredients might be, it is best to remember that we are very fortunate to have amongst us many “small” people who are thriving quite admirably, and yet also receive supports from services. Their lives and the strategies of their supporters can be our template for discerning what it is that we need to understand much better than we now do. This is, of course, how much wisdom is generated over the eons, through learning from life and what it teaches.

It is not the purpose in this note to summarize those insights, but rather to point to them as a potential resource in evolving the kinds of “systems” that edify rather than oppress. If we are not disciplined enough to attend to these, and properly appreciate what potential they hold for our betterment, we are ignoring a gift that has been carefully crafted by those many anonymous allies of ours that have tried to remain true to people and their potential. In their hard and obscure work in the vineyards of people’s lives, they have been quietly shaping their own conclusions about what has worked for them, why it is so, what it means for their future efforts, the blind alleys and false hopes that have led them astray and so on. All of which may hold the wisdom that is the foundation for many others whose lives are still unfolding.

It is notable that such persons, including the people supported, are often quite aware of what they have found to be important, and may even be adamant concerning what is trivial and what is profound. When they speak, they talk of the importance of attitudes and values, of listening more deeply, of being open to hidden potentials, of commitment and loyalty to people, of empowerment, of

social inclusion, of dreaming, of the constancy of people in your life, of flexible and non-invasive bureaucracy, of personalized safeguards, of a willingness to try again and again, of the value of experimenting, of passion and its place in solutions, of the role of smallness, of leaving decisions and authority close to people and so on.

Strikingly they do not normally speak of top down organizational gimmicks and formulae of the kind that lead to the usual technocratic panaceas, but they nonetheless often do have quite clear ideas about how organizations could and should assist. The question is whether the organizations have the capacity to appreciate this guidance, to partner with it and to transform themselves to better conform to this guidance. Clearly, “thriving” must have its own internal logic and necessities and this obviously can be worked with once it is better understood by those sensible enough to be students of it.