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The Habit of Hierarchy: Power, Privilege and Prestige

By: Dave Hingsburger

The word 'service' appears a lot in the language of individuals and agencies who support people with disabilities. We talk about 'the people we serve' or 'service users,' and we refer to ourselves and our agencies as 'service providers.' The word 'service' places us amongst those people who are often honoured for our work, if not by our pay, certainly by the reaction of others to what we do. We are told that we are 'special,' and that we are 'patient,' and that we are 'kind,' and further we are told that we are (the right kind of) 'different.' We do what others can't do by providing service to people so marginalized that others can't imagine close proximity without horror.

So.

Then.

We are seen as good people who do things for the good of people who need good things done for them to make up for the tragedy of their existence. This leads to us, inevitably, thinking that we are (just a little bit) magnificent or maybe (a wee bit) noble. We no longer need to question our motive because ...

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We provide 'service,' and thus we are 'servants.'

And.

We are full of nobility because of the work we do.

It's easy to see how we can get into a mindset where we don't need much introspection because that work is behind us, we know our heart is good, we know we do what's good for others, we begin to see ourselves as 'saviours' and 'sanctifiers' ... we make people real.

But then there are those who question that. One of my favourite quotes is by the writer C. S. Lewis who is most famous for 'The Chronicles of Narnia.' But it may surprise you he's written about tyranny, and here's something he had to say:



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“Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron’s cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience. They may be more likely to go to Heaven yet at the same time likelier to make a Hell of earth. This very kindness stings with intolerable insult. To be “cured” against one’s will and cured of states which we may not regard as disease is to be put on a level of those who have not yet reached the age of reason or those who never will ...”

So, Lewis warns us of our ‘good will’ and suggests that it can lead to a kind of tyranny over the lives of another.

“No, you can’t watch that program, it’s age inappropriate; it’s best you watch what I choose.”

“No, you can’t go to that church, I don’t believe in their kind of God; it’s best you go to my church with me.”

“No, you can’t date that person; you are not gay, not on my watch.”

These are big and obvious ones, how about:

“No, we can’t stop at Dairy Queen; I think you need to lose some weight.”

“No, you can’t visit your parents this weekend; you had a tantrum on Monday.”

“No, you haven’t been good today, and that means you can’t watch your show.”

Reading these on paper is one thing; the ease at which this kind of judgement comes out of our mouths is astonishing. I was teaching a class only two days ago, and two fellows sat on chairs that were facing the table and away from where I was sitting. It bothered me that their backs were to me; I wanted to see their faces. I approached them and asked them to turn their chairs. When they didn’t do as I asked, I had to fight down, really, really, really had to fight down asking again and even touching their chairs to get them to move. I didn’t, but it was a fight.

Because ... well, because ...

I KNOW BETTER.

The first of three habits of hierarchy that we need to address.

There are several false beliefs that we tuck away inside our passport to privilege and this is one of them. We are smart. They are not. We know better how they should live their lives than they do. If they’d only just listen to our wisdom, all would be well. Yep, we know better.

As a person with a physical disability, I can tell you I resent it when people who are not wheelchair users tell me how I should live and move and be in the world. They assume that expertise comes from how they live their lives in normalcy, and that those of us who don't need their guidance to get to the goal. My response is some kind of nice version of "Shut Up." I may occasionally need the help of others; I don't need the constant interference of others. I may need you to reach for something out of my grasp; I don't need you to assume that I need you to determine what I should reach for. I may need you to move something out of my way, that doesn't mean that you can determine my path.

You don't know better how to be me.

You don't know better for anyone.

There are two possible things that might help you. The first is realizing that almost every bad decision that a person makes is the same bad decision that you have made and that most people make in the course of their lifetime. The second is understanding that most of your 'facts' are actually just your 'opinions,' and sometimes people just don't need to hear them.

WHAT ABOUT RISK!!!!

Hush, now, that's just your privilege screaming for notice. I'm clearly not talking about allowing someone to step in front of oncoming traffic. I'm also not talking about allowing someone to eat poison. I'm also not talking about people cutting themselves to ribbons with sharp knives. Remember we intervene with EVERYONE when one of these things happens or is about to happen. It's part of the responsibility that we all hold to each other.

This issue of risk is raised most often to justify tyranny.

"It's for their own good."

The antidote to I KNOW BETTER is simple. It's learning to listen to people with intellectual disabilities. Now this isn't like listening to your friends, or listening to your parents, or listening to instructions on YouTube on how to make Coke salad. No. It's just not. To listen to a person with an intellectual disability you have to:

- 1) Believe that they have something important to say.
- 2) Believe that it's worth the time to listen.
- 3) Believe that hearing their message will allow you to provide better service.

That's a lot of belief. And if you have that belief, it's a start, then you need to:

- 1) Pay attention to what they are saying.
- 2) Shut up with desire to lead the conversation.
- 3) Indicate that you've heard and understood what's been said.

I CAN ASSUME THAT PERMISSION IS GIVEN

The 2nd Habit of Hierarchy

Disability isn't permission.

I was pushing myself up a steep curb cut a few days ago, a car pulled off to the side of the road, a fellow leapt out of the car, he ran behind me, grabbed my chair, and shoved me up the side of the road. On his way back to the car, he said, "No, Thanks Necessary." I yelled at the car driving away, "No, But Permission Was Necessary." He saw me, he saw my disability, and assumed permission to intercede on my behalf.

It's even harder for direct support professionals who are hired to be helpers and that, of course, leads to the assumption that help is what is wanted, help is what is needed, and help is what I'm here to give. It's worsened by the fact that giving help feels good, it's like a narcotic, it gives a buzz.

"Here, let me do that for you ..."

"It'll be quicker if I just help a bit ..."

"Never you mind, I'm here to help ..."

Each time someone says something like this, the other person has been denied the chance to do it themselves, or to feel the power they have to give or, deny permission to another for help. The message that the 'helper's hand is strong and reliable, and my own are ineffectual and bothersome' is being given. Deciding on help or not help is one of the most important choices that a person with a disability gets to make.

I once watched a young boy where I volunteered time while in university struggle, really struggle, to put his coat on. I had decided that, if he wanted my help, he would ask. At first, he rushed, I think because he anticipated intrusion, but then he took a breath, calmed himself, and put the coat on. The joy on his face was worth every moment I'd waited for it. It felt like it took forever, it didn't; nothing actually ever takes forever. He needed me to make space for him to succeed. He didn't need me to feed my addiction to the narcotic effects of helping.

The antidote is simple.

Either wait to be asked or ask for permission.

This isn't rocket science, it's harder than that, it's about allowing yourself to be in a position of serving not leading, supporting not diminishing, and seeing what's actually in front of you.

I AM ENOUGH FOR YOU / THIS IS ENOUGH FOR YOU

The Third Habit of Hierarchy ...

So many direct support staff have such kind hearts and really do care about the people they serve. They know they aren't friends, and they know they aren't family, but it can sometimes feel that way. They come in and give amazing support, they give of themselves, and they really want what's best for someone.

Therefore, when someone expresses loneliness, it can hurt a bit, and things can be said:

"Not to worry, I'm always here for you."

"Oh, you have so many friends here."

"You just need to focus on all that you do have, and all the reasons you should be happy."

These things are all meant kindly, but they are translated in the ear of the person with a disability into 'Shut up, I don't want to talk about this.' Ignoring someone's statement of loneliness, or the fact that they feel friendless, or the fact that they feel that they have no value in the world is a huge mistake. It's painful to hear this stuff, but hear it we must.

There are two ways of committing suicide. One is the physical death of the body. The other is the spiritual death of the self. People with intellectual disabilities are not safe from suicide because we've counted sharps – the self, inside, can die without leaving so much as a mark. Language about isolation and loneliness matters.

It should affect us to the point of action. Maybe it's time to work on social skills a bit, maybe it's time to get people into environments where they can naturally meet other people, or even be in a place where everyone loves the same thing. I was talking with a friend after the Raptors won the NBA. They had taken the person they served, a man who spoke of nothing but loneliness, down to the big rally in the city. He was with thousands of other people cheering and high 5'ing, and simply celebrating. These were not his friends, but he was also no longer, for a few hours anyway, alone. I thought it a brilliant way of responding to his sentiments of loneliness. Yeah, it's a quick fix, but that's not nothing. I tire of people who do nothing because they see the bigness of a problem but not the opportunities of a moment.

People with disabilities, I can attest to this, are still dream machines. We still want for, and wish for, and long for things to be better. We want to be loved and touched. We want to be included and welcomed. We want more than what's here right now.

This is not a condemnation of you.

Or of the organization you serve.

If the person is still dreaming, you've done something right.

The antidote is action. Begin to go in the direction that they want to go. Find moments. Look for opportunities. Be alert to death by despair.

SUMMARY

Hierarchy can lead to misuses of power, we know that, but C. S. Lewis goes further and suggests that the ‘for their own good’ aspect of our job can lead to tyranny.

We need to constantly check in with ourselves.

Are we serving?

Serving?

The answer to that question makes all the difference in the world to those who are either in our care or under our care.

About the author

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