

On Being Brave and Bold When Neither Comes Naturally

Beverley Funnell works within the Queensland Office of the Public Advocate, with a focus on improving laws, structures, policies, service practices and attitudes that have an impact on adults with a decision making disability. Beverley has been actively involved in reform processes in both Wales and Australia since the 1980s. Here Beverley reminds us all of some of the human qualities needed for social change efforts.

I have always thought I was just lucky. I accepted my first job in the disability area from a mixed perspective of curiosity, challenge and desperation – I needed a job to support myself while overseas. Why I have stayed in the area for so long is another story. I have found that, for me, a general commitment to the rights of all human beings requires a particular focus; a focus on disability provides an avenue of expression if I am to achieve anything more than a sense of outrage. Circumstances led me to the disability area; the injustices I discovered hooked me in. Whether that constitutes a calling I cannot say. Nevertheless I am here and since there is more than a lifetime's work to be done I will stay for a while longer.

During my twenty-four years spent working in organisations that are associated with serving people with disabilities, I have had the privilege of being involved in a number of reform processes. Those times were characterised by great optimism and hope. Being brave and bold at those times was not too difficult. There was company. There was good leadership. Ideas were abundant. A retrospective reappraisal might suggest that I was not brave at all, merely taking the opportunities that were presented by historical circumstance. Perhaps courage, like other human attributes, should only be judged within its own context.

The optimism of earlier times is not so evident in our current environment. Optimism still resides in quite a few hearts and minds but at a social policy level, concepts such as hope, love, acceptance and decent lives rarely rate a mention. In the corridors of power reference is rarely made to a positive vision of good lives for people with disabilities. 'Values' has virtually become a forbidden word. In the past, there have been periods of great optimism about the possibilities for people with disabilities. This cannot be said of the present. Instead, we have a great deal of attention being given to issues of civil containment, physical restraint, and 'managing the problem'. We have the highest level of funding ever, but reference to a developmental approach for people with disabilities has virtually disappeared, while record keeping, protocols, regulations and reporting exist on a scale hitherto unknown.

Official rhetoric is moving further and further away from the reality of people's lives. Being brave and bold is not so easy these days. Defensiveness is the hallmark of the day. Polite people with closed minds are found everywhere. On the other hand those waiting for the next bright idea or new technology are still with us. These are the fad or trend followers. Along with a detector for injustice, we therefore need to cultivate antennae for hyperbole, and rhetoric without substance.

Perhaps one of the most damaging of management fads has been the promotion of the content free manager. Without an understanding of the lived experience of marginalised people many good ideas, potentially sound

approaches and methodologies can become perverted. Scarce resources can be so easily wasted. Other fads we have not finished with yet include: individualised funding (contrasted with individualised approaches); person centred-planning (contrasted with person-centredness); community engagement (contrasted with listening to people); quality assurance (contrasted with providing a quality service that meets needs); and carer recognition (contrasted with providing real support to families).

In many quarters there is a deafening silence about the conditions in which some marginalised people are living. When these are pointed out it is usually viewed as someone else's responsibility. Leadership informed by values, ideas and hopes is scant. Being brave and bold is required as much now as it ever was, perhaps even more so.

A note of caution is also required. Being brave and bold for its own sake is as dangerous as promoting change for change's sake. Some people act as though speaking out aggressively is the test of being bold and brave. It may be, but it can also be singularly unhelpful. It may make the spokesperson feel better but will it advance the interests of vulnerable people?

I suspect that we often confuse principles with practice. Recognising a bad idea, policy, or practice and naming it for ourselves is one thing; what we then do with it is critical. Being brave and bold can often mean waiting for and recognising the optimum moment or conditions. Naming issues does not always need to be shaming, except perhaps as a last resort. The use of humiliation and shame does not usually produce the best kind of change. I am aware that in our culture, despite all the rhetoric to the contrary, there is great discomfort with critique. This does not mean we should not provide critique but we need to be smarter about how we do it.

Most of us realise that the struggle for better lives for people with disabilities is unending. Phrases like 'the long haul' may appear somewhat over used, but the truth remains. We do need to hold on and we can hold on. We can learn from each other, we can be open to new people and their ideas, we can struggle to understand the other person's point of view, we can find common ground.

Should courage and boldness be tempered by wisdom, and if not tempered by our own then by someone else's? If we are in the business of critiquing others then let us remain open to advice about our own behaviour. Over-active egos can often motivate our actions, sometimes accounting for an excess of boldness at the expense of real courage and thoughtfulness.

Remember that however politely or nicely you convey your message you will rarely be thanked for doing so. What will help us to be brave will be our determination to stay focussed on why we are here at all and who it is we seek to serve.