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THE CHALLENGE - BRINGING THE PHILOSOPHY OF IWRP INTO PRACTICE

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Mine is the unenviable position of coming along at the end of three days, after nine hours of discussion groups, several hours of presentations, and innumerable hours of informal exchange of opinion and trying to wrap it up in a neat summarized package. I am told that a wrap-up speech is to be an inspirational send off from a conference, the final "go out there and get one for old gip" kind of talk characteristic of Knute Rockne before he sent his team back into the game.

In actuality, I see myself more in the position of Charlie Brown from my old cartoon favorite "Peanuts". In the particular comic strip I have in mind Charlie, Lucy, and Linus are lying on a grassy hillside looking up at the white fluffy clouds floating over on a summer day. Lucy comments, "If you look up at those cloud formations and use your imagination you can often see familiar forms. Tell me, Linus, what do you see?" Linus responded, "Off to the left I imagine that I see the outline of the country of British Honduras. Off to the right I can imagine the profile of the famous sculptor Thomas Eakins. Straight above I fancy that I see a tableau of the stoning of St. Stephen. I can even see the Apostle Paul standing off to the right." "That's very good, Linus," said Lucy, "and what do you see Charlie Brown?" In his usual forced humility Charlie Brown answers, "Well, I was planning to say that I saw a horsey and duckie, but I guess I'll forget about it." I am fearful that my wrap-up presentation is likely to be more horsey than duckie but I certainly have no difficulty identifying with how Charlie Brown might have felt.

I believe we could say, without being accused of too much false pride, that the members of the SCDs making up this conference are an intelligent group of people. Even though I feel that can be said, I also feel that, given that intelligence, we have still struggled with the mastery of implementing the concept of the IWRP with deaf clients.

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In order that we might not feel too badly about our struggle, I would like to share with you the experience of one of the more brilliant men in the history of the United States. I refer to Thomas Jefferson. Anyone who has been a student of history would not deny that Thomas Jefferson was probably without equal in intelligence and in his ability to conceptualize the implementation of a democratic concept. John F. Kennedy once invited to the White House a group of the most respected and brilliant thinkers available in the United States. He is reported to have said to them that this was a singular occasion and that gathered in the White House was the greatest collection of wisdom ever – with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone in the White House.

Allow me to share with you a letter received by Thomas Jefferson in care of the Continental Congress from Lord North of the British Empire in response to Lord North's first review of the Declaration of Independence.

July 20, 1776

Dear Mr. Jefferson:

We have read your "Declaration of Independence" with great interest. Certainly it represents a considerable undertaking, and many of your statements do merit serious considerations. Unfortunately, the Declaration as a whole fails to meet recently adopted specifications or proposals to the Crown, so we must return the document to you for further refinement. The questions which follow might assist you in your process of revision.

1. In your opening paragraph you use the phrase "the Laws of Nature and Nature's God". What are these laws? In what ways are they the criteria which you base your central arguments? Please document with citations from the recent literature.

2. In the same paragraph you refer to the "opinions of mankind". Whose polling data are you using? Without specific evidence, it seems to us the "opinions of mankind" are a matter of opinion.

3. You hold certain truths to be "self evident". Would you please elaborate? If they are as evident as you claim, then it should not be difficult for you to locate the appropriate supporting statistics.

4. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" seem to be goals of your proposal. These are not measurable goals. If you were to say that "among these is the ability to sustain an average life expectancy in six of the 13 colonies of at least 55 years," for example, that would be a measurable goal. Please clarify.

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5. Your description of the existing situation is quite extensive. Such a long list of grievances should precede the statement of goals, not follow it.

6. Your strategy for achieving your goal is not developed at all. You state that the colonies “ought to be Free and Independent States,” and that they are “Absolved from All Allegiance to the British Crown.” Who or what must change to achieve this objective? What specific steps will you take to overcome the resistance? How long will it take? We have found that a little foresight in these areas helps to prevent careless errors later on.

7. Who among the list of signatories will be responsible for implementing your strategy? Who provided the theoretical research? Who will constitute the Advisory Committee? Please submit an organizational chart.

8. You must include an evaluation design. We have been requiring this since Queen Anne’s War.

9. Please submit a PERT diagram, an activity chart, and an itemized budget.

Your failure to include any assessment of the impact of your program inspires little confidence in the long-range prospects of your undertaking. We hope that these comments prove useful in revising your “Declaration of Independence.”

Best Wishes,
Lord North¹

Obviously, this is a letter written by someone in frustration attempting to cope with bureaucratic requirements. I share this letter with you not to belittle the IWRP but to illustrate what I consider to be an important point for us to remember. Just as the Declaration of Independence was a philosophical document of principle, the IWRP is but one evolving extension of this very same principle. Granted, Tom Jefferson, for all of his brilliance, may have had great difficulty in complying with the demands for specificity set out by Lord North, he kept his eye focused on the basic principle. He knew that it would be a long term process of evolution for the truths that he set down on paper to become self-evident and yet 200 years of history have proven that this simple philosophical document had the power in it to work to the good of the common man. We continue to evolve in the concepts of the Declaration of Independence and no one can honestly say that we will ever arrive at a full realization of the concept. The struggle for equal treatment, for equal access, for equal opportunity, for equal participation goes on today.

¹Edward Schwartz, President of the Institute for Study of Civic Values – From a Newsletter of the Division of Program Evaluation, Research, and Pupil Services of Los Angeles County Board of Education.

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The IWRP, and parenthetically such laws as Public Law 94-142, Section 503 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, are reminders to us of the truths that perhaps are less evident than we think. These laws tell our lowly deaf client that this is your government and you have rights that should be as sacred today as they were when first we founded this republic.

The group discussion of the past few days have taught us, I think, that concepts such as equal rights and full participation in your destiny are much more difficult to implement than they are to talk about. But I believe we must, as we struggle with the specificity, keep our eye constantly on the principle. It will be our on-going responsibility to devote our energy to seeing that the principle can work. That means that we will continue to struggle with those realistic barriers that stand in the way of implementing a democratic process we call the IWRP.

It would be an impossibility to capture all of the important issues that were raised in our two days of discussion and summarize them in this presentation. We will defer that attempt to the editorial task of pulling these proceedings together.

In Dr. Melia's presentation he pointed out the history of the IWRP and reminded us in the field of deafness that we have an opportunity to be out front in demonstrating the implementation of this concept.

Dr. Randolph, in her presentation, shared with us the philosophical base of the IWRP.

Our groups wrestled with the many different stages of progress going on within the various states as they attempt to put the IWRP into action. There were, however, two points within this conference that I would like to particularly stress.

I have never met Tom Posedly and I regret that a death in his family prevented him from joining us. I feel we were perhaps cheated from gathering some wise input from a consumer point of view.

Tom did send us a short letter which was read before the Conference and is included in these proceedings. I was particularly struck by the simplicity of his comments and yet the fundamental truth they contained. I would like to remind us of these comments again.

Tom is in the architectural profession and he began by drawing a beautiful analogy between his profession and the IWRP. The IWRP is planning ahead, a blueprint, if you will, of what we plan to do with and for a client. But Tom Posedly reminds us of where the difference lies in his analogy. He cautioned us to remember that a human being is far less predictable than a building and, therefore, one can never hold the plan sacred at the expense of the client. We cannot expect a person to mechanically respond to our plans. Let me say that this Tom also states some truths which are perhaps self-evident and yet by their very simplicity, we may tend to overlook them.

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Another event in our workshop that came home strongly to me was the videotaped explanation of the IWRP to the deaf client with minimal language skills. To me, this was a dramatic illustration of the vast distance we must cross to bring the philosophy of the IWRP to a meaningful reality for such a client.

To return to Tom Jefferson for a moment. Jefferson was of the aristocracy and even as he drafted the concepts of the Declaration of Independence, he could not foresee how very difficult it would be to bring democracy to the masses. In a similar fashion, we must honestly state that the IWRP as a concept is an upper-middle class concept visualized by people who may never have met and certainly may not know our short deaf client in the videotape presentation. It falls to us to translate and interpret the concept to such a client and as we observed, that is easier said than done.

Before we can comfortably say that the IWRP is a meaningful process for such clients, we will need to overthrow and begin to reverse years of paternalistic treatment of deaf persons. It will take years of evolution for us to draw that client into a true equal participation. Just as Tom Jefferson, himself a slave owner, was going against the course of history in expounding the principle that all men were created equal, we have barely begun to make the dream of true client participation a reality.

But knowing that it is difficult is no reason not to do it. I say again that we must keep our eye on the principle. Granted that our counselor in the videotape looked almost ridiculous as he attempted to explain the IWRP to this deaf client but what is really important, however, is that he tried. He knew he had an obligation to meet that client on his ground.

Lyndon Johnson once said at a human rights conference, "There are many people in the United States that do not stand on even ground." Certainly, we know that deaf clients do not stand on equal ground. The IWRP is a vehicle, a principle, that will continually remind us that regardless of the frustration, regardless of the difficulty, regardless of the setbacks we may encounter, our eye must be on the principle at stake. We must continue in every effort to bring the deaf client out of the bonds of paternalism to equal ground.

If you don't see that as a challenge, then I can only assume that you have slept through this entire conference.