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## **False Realism And The Unexplored Potential In People's Lives**

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We live at a time when there is much emphasis on seeing people with disability as being people just like everyone else. This is a most welcome development, as people with disability have suffered greatly in not being seen as fully human, and not being treated as unique and interesting individuals in their own right. All of the attention has seemingly gone to endlessly evaluating what people are not, rather than better unleashing the hope and potential in people's lives. It is almost always true that people will tend to underestimate, rather than overestimate, what could be possible in life for people with disability.

A key factor in much of this is the extent to which most of us are limited by what we have not yet seen, experienced or believed to be feasible. Our beliefs about what is actually practical, and within the realm of reasonability, tend to be things which are already part of our life or theirs, rather than options which are as yet untried or unfamiliar. So, what we consider to be "realistic" is most often more of what has already happened rather than what has not yet happened. In many cases, we may be deeply sceptical of what is new simply because the old is so comfortable, even if it is not all that satisfying.

What we may forget in our ardent "realism", is that much of what today is now possible in life for people with disability was once considered "unrealistic" by many people, and more or less had to prove itself before people granted it the credibility it deserved. The option had actually been "realistic" all along, it was just that our previous sense of "realism" did not allow us to be sufficiently open to its potential. We were suffering from "false realism", insofar as we were actually wrong in our beliefs, given that the option was ultimately proven to be quite sensible. Now if that can happen in the past, it should be obvious that it is probably happening now in much the same way. The interesting question in all of this is, of course, what in the world are we dismissing as "unrealistic" today that will also, in the future, prove us to have been wrong yet again.

The alternative to "false realism" is not to abandon scepticism and a careful appraisal of whether or not something new and unfamiliar lives up to its billing. This would leave us unprotected against all manner of possible folly. No, the remedy is actually

something quite different. It is in seeing that we need to be open to the unknown, because somewhere in its depths are ideas, options and potentials that are genuine and authentically good for people with disability. It is not sensible to walk away from options that bring valuable benefits into our lives. Yet, when we take no time to explore and try such options, we are actually depriving ourselves of advantages that might well make a striking difference for the better in our lives. By all means we should fear the unknown, because of the dangers it may contain, but we should also be wise enough to recognise that the unknown and unfamiliar may also be a very good friend.

In order to be able to sort out what might be good in the unknown from what might be worrisome, we need to accept responsibility for entering the unknown, and seeing what it has to offer. This is what some people might call “imagining better” or “dreaming”, in the sense that this is the way that we link the possible potentials in the unknown and unexplored to what is still missing in our lives, or the lives of people with disability. A “dream” is really just an image or picture of what might conceivably improve life, but it frequently is a crucial step towards eventually attempting something in one’s life that offers the promise of fulfillment of our hopes, wants and needs. It is also the way in which we can try on the unknown for size, and see whether it is actually what we need or want.

If today’s “reality” is not really meeting the needs of a person with disability, then it is logical that we should question today’s “realism” as it is obviously not a reality that is helping. The question that then forms is “what might possibly be better than we have today?” When we take the step of wondering what might be better, we start becoming practical problem solvers. By not being married to what there is in life now, but rather by looking past today’s reality to what ought to be there for people, we become engaged in the creation of new possibilities. In fact, we will make more progress if we are actually “sensibly unrealistic”, insofar as we reach for something we cannot yet prove is realistic. We can, however, assume that there must be something awaiting us that will indeed prove to be good and beneficial though it is not yet part of our lives.

The best guide to what these options might be can usually be found by considering more carefully what it is that satisfies the needs and wants of people who do not live with a disability. In most cases, with a few adaptations that take account of the impairments that people may live with, highly “ordinary” options that work for all other people will normally prove to also work for people with disability. Even if those options are unknown or untested with people with disability, they are clearly “proven” already with most of humankind. This is why it is highly likely that they will also work for people with disability, given that they are people like everyone else, with all the diversity and potential that being human offers.

We might never attempt what is being suggested here if we become unduly preoccupied with what a particular person cannot do or be, as that negative emphasis will divert our attention from the more positive question of what the particular person would enjoy in life. Almost always, when this hopeful exploration is the emphasis, people’s lives will expand in the direction of their true potential. What the person cannot do or manage might simply be done by others, thereby eliminating this as an issue. We are all dependent on others in life to take care of many things, so even the need to be supported is quite typical, and ought not to be seen as being somehow unusual.

“True realism” as opposed to “false realism” comes about whenever we both give in to hope, and look beyond the moment to the promise of what life might yet offer. It in no way requires us to wear rose-coloured glasses or to ignore the many hardships and difficulties of life. It simply asks that we not become so preoccupied with the barriers in life that we no longer dream. When we resign ourselves to “reality”, we forfeit the chance to taste the benefits of other unconsidered realities, many of which may be just as practical as any reality we rely on today.

There is a saying that “where there is life there is hope”. This is most certainly true. Nonetheless, when hopes and dreams are ignored, or are undernourished, then life and its potentials will elude us. As we know, many dreams will not always come to be, but this should not stop us from dreaming. We dream not because we are assured that what we explore will be guaranteed, but rather that dreams link us to the deep promise of life and its potential. It is this potential that rightfully belongs to people with

disability as much as anyone else. We must be very careful when we deny this to them in the name of realism.