

THIS PUBLICATION KINDLY PROVIDED TO WESTRALIA.NET
With the Kind permission of the Author, Michael Kendrick.



WWW.WESTRALIA.NET

The Potential Role Of Advocacy In “Imagining Better”

Paper prepared by:
Michael J. Kendrick PhD
4 Bullard Ave., Holyoke, MA
USA 01040
Tel: 413 533 3511/fax 413 533 8071
Email: kendrickconsult@attglobal.net
www.kendrickconsulting.org

Citation: Michael J. Kendrick “The Potential Role Of Advocacy In
Imagining Better”, *Frontline*, Issue 51, pp. 26-27, Dublin, Ireland,
July 2002.

Complaints Or Disguised Prospects?

The common role advocacy is cast into is that of pursuing the complaints and interests affecting disadvantaged people. This “processing of grievances” role certainly does occupy the attention of many people who are in the advocacy role, including people advocating for themselves, peer advocates, family advocacy, legal advocacy, informal advocacy, professional advocates at the individual and systems level, citizen advocates and many others. This role of complainant, even though grudgingly seen as legitimate, often leaves advocates appearing to be people or organizations that are chronically dissatisfied and unappreciative. This is unfortunate, as there is usually a great deal more to be said and valued concerning what advocates are actually about.

Advocates, be they formal or informal, do not invariably become critical of governments, communities, services and practices simply out of some neurotic and vindictive animus towards our social institutions. On the contrary, most advocates would relish the prospect of these entities attaining even a portion of the potential they are capable of. This is because advocates often see the net impact on vulnerable and powerless people of what it means when things do not work as they should. Often, these effects are irreparably damaging and tragic in their consequences, and might well be cause for a measure of embitterment, anger and even rage. Nonetheless, were this the only motive and intent of advocates, we could well expect a great deal more animosity than we actually see.

What we may miss seeing is that advocates are frequently people who have become persuaded that the world can be “better” than it is, and that it is incumbent upon them to struggle for what might bring this improved world into closer proximity. In this, advocates may have the same intuition that many other “change agents” share, that both the victims of injustice and mistreatment, as well as our society, may have considerably more uplifting prospects were things to change. So, what often lies beneath the complaints of advocates, is the recognition of “better”, often well

before “better” is under general consideration by the mass of society.

Being Educated About The Need For “Better”

Advocates are often convinced well in advance of many others about the depth, gravity and urgency of many shortcomings of society, long before those in official roles are prepared to admit to the toxicity of elements of the status quo. Official denial, dissembling and even cover-ups may well precede the eventual admission that something is in urgent need of change. Those who personally witness the sad outcomes for people of failed doctrines, regimes, and orthodoxies are often denuded rather unceremoniously of their illusions about the social or political order when this starts to produce a toll in human lives, sufferings and injustices. It is in both seeing this toll clearly, and admitting to its ultimate meaning, that has changed many a person from a position of simple inquiry to one of resolved and committed advocacy. They have become convinced that “better” best arrive sooner rather than later.

Seeking And Needing “Better”

Naturally, when one does witness harm to people, it creates an appetite for answers to what ought to have been pursued to avoid the original injury to people and their interests. This may provoke, in the engaged person, a search for answers that could possibly serve as a “remedy”. “Remedies” are not usually quite so straightforward in matters involving social and institutional change, as the evils to be confronted are rarely simply the discrete actions of a few people, and may well involve a set of broad and interlinked changes involving even multitudes. Nevertheless, the formation of a raw sense of what is right and better may well emerge, in their initial forms, in the guise of tentative assertions that both something is wrong and that actions of various kinds might well repair the harm. Not infrequently, the advocate may be steeped for months and even years in a stew of disquiet and angst as they cast about for answers.

Imagining “Better”

A deeply challenging internal process takes place in people, who are provoked by the offending aspects of life and community that could be called envisioning or imagining “better”. This process, often called “dreaming” in some circles, may seem to many people to be a misguided indulgence in pointless fantasy. Nonetheless, the “imaginal” process is an essential characteristic of how people come to shift their sense of what is actually real or come to perceive new realities. All of this “imagining” takes place in the various realms of the human mind, and may often involve intuitive aspects of the subconscious mind. As humans, we create and test mental pictures or images that gradually become organized into the visions and ideologies that guide our sense of what form “better” might take. Naturally, such image construction is quite tentative and flawed, yet it may still provide us with a sense of practical possibility.

Values, Human Well-Being And The Making Of “Better”

The formation of a vision of “better”, while containing many elements of imagination, is also deeply guided by what it is we come to believe is necessary for the preservation and advancement of our ultimate well-being as people. Often, for the establishment of our personal foundations of hope and belief we turn to our cultures, religions and other cornerstones of what we believe to be truth and faith. This search for what might be the “good” in life is a well-known quest in the best of times, but it has a special poignancy when we are forced to confront the injustices and degradations of life and society. These many disturbing manifestations of what some may call the “human condition” often stimulate us to identify and affirm the values, morality and ethics that leave human beings uplifted rather than devalued.

Social Movements And Advocacy As Symbols Of “Values Based Imagining Better”

When personal and collective imaginings are powered by sufficient resolution to seek and pursue values that are (hopefully) edifying for both individuals and society, then we see both their advocacy and the coming together of adherents in common cause. These movements, often provoked by human calamities, but inspired by a vision of a greater good, can work in society to bring about changes that are much needed. Arousing human concern does not alone necessarily lead to change if there is not also present an image of practical solutions that can be pursued. These hopes of “better” are often bound up in ideologies that attempt to express both the motives for change, as well as the form(s) it should take.

The Impotence Of Advocacy Denuded Of Moral Hope And Practical Visions

Though it may seem strange to say it so bluntly, advocacy would not occur if there were not present in people a sense of hope both that life ought to and could be improved for disadvantaged people. Thus, what may initially appear on the surface to be solely unproductive criticism, dissatisfaction and possibly even destructive dissent may, in its own imperfect way, be a statement of underlying idealism, constructiveness and longing for a better world. Were such an impulse to be missing from people and society, we could well be deprived of both hope and practical visions for social progress. Put in other terms, the fundamental active ingredient and enervating basis of positive advocacy, may well rest in the ability of people to see past the grimness of much of everyday life, to a sense of human potential that has yet to be realized. Believing in such possibilities, before they could possibly be made real in any practical sense, must inevitably precede any practical progress on the ground. It is no wonder that most brands of “realism” help entrench rather than confront the evils institutionalised in our way of life.

The Hope In Taking Values And “Responsible And Sensible Unreality” Seriously

If we do not have people willing to stand by, affirm and uphold positive values as it relates to mistreated people, then we will not have advocacy, nor will we have the eventual realization any numbers of practical visions for a better world. It is always most urgent and necessary that people not be talked out of their dreams for a better world, as cutting off this moral and practical impulse will leave us condemned to abide with whatever injustices, indignities and shameful conditions our era creates. It may not be overstating things at all to say that a measure of “sensible unreality” may be just what is needed when the actual reality is so deficient. From such imaginings may well come precisely the practical breakthroughs that our values need if they are to be made manifest in how we actually live.

The Caution And Wisdom In Recognizing The Inevitable Shortcomings Of Advocacy And Imagining

Advocacy, despite the richness of its potential contribution, is no panacea. Advocates are unrelentingly beset by all of the forms of human imperfection and perversity, whether they see this or not. Consequently, we must be careful to not place too much hope in what they can do, as they may well pursue aims, visions, values and interests that are as perverse as anything else. Nonetheless, it is still important to remain open to what advocacy may occasionally mean for the sufferings and standing of disadvantaged and demoralized people. Were advocacy not to be present and encouraged in our communities, we might well be deprived of much of what is best in people. Consequently, it may well be worthwhile to think twice before we dismiss the dissent, questioning and attacks of advocates. Perhaps there may be more to be discovered there than meets the eye.