

Taking the non-problem seriously

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This piece is in memory of Neil Jameson, founder of Citizens UK,¹ an inspirational F/friend. Neil introduced me to the idea that, rather than take a supplicant, awed or intimidated approach to those in power, vying for their attention and hoping to persuade them to listen to us, we can behave differently. We can stand proud and tall, as fellow citizens of this earth, expecting our voice to be heard and our opinions to have some sway. We don't allow the power imbalance to get in the way of honest dialogue.

Neil's work emboldened many people to speak their truths to those in power and expect to be listened to. These words led to actions, to genuine social change, most notably the concept of the living wage, which is now a commonly-understood concept; it pushes debate from what the company paying the wage can afford, to what life can be afforded by the wage received.

So, in writing this piece, and in honour of the benefit of looking at things through a different lens, I'm going to take us over familiar terrain – poverty in the UK – but from some different perspectives.

The theme of this edition of *Friends Quarterly* is centred around Hallowe'en and every single year for the last two decades, I've hauled Hallowe'en decorations out of the loft and adorned them around my house, initially for excited toddlers, then in front of disinterested teenagers, and now, well, really just out of habit. Also, for the last two decades, I've worked at Quaker Social Action (QSA),² a Quaker charity founded over 150 years ago

1 A tribute and obituary can be found at www.citizensuk.org/about-us/news/marking-the-legacy-of-neil-jameson-citizens-uks-founder.

2 For further information visit <https://quakersocialaction.org.uk/>.

to practically address different facets of poverty and social injustice, initially in east London but now with a national profile.

Of course, unlike the Hallowe'en decorations, much has changed in my working life in that time, in the world around us and how we think about our work. Even just in the last few years, the broadening understanding of inequity, racism and power imbalances, catalysed by the murder of George Floyd, has led to QSA and others thinking deep and hard about such issues.

The title of this piece – 'Taking the non-problem seriously' – is a concept I was introduced to many years ago, while learning about the therapeutic process. Of course, a therapist is there to listen to the problem(s) of their client but they are also attuned to when non-problems creep into the therapy room. This is where the client brings other things into the discussion, green shoots of positivity, observations about the sunny day, expressions of excitement about something they are planning. The non-problems are starting to gain some traction against the problems.

I *could* write a piece which lays out the many problems and challenges we see in our work at QSA, the desperately sad and wicked circumstances that people find themselves in, at the sharp end and on the breadline, but I worry that these are stories we've all heard so often, and it's hard to know where they can take us, beyond sympathy and a sense of despair. So, instead, I would like to invite you to come on a different journey with me and instead to explore three non-problems; dignity, proximity and love.

Dignity

One of my colleagues recently helped out with Turn A Corner, our mobile library for people who are experiencing homelessness. Our library goes out on the streets of central London three times a week, come rain or shine (and, let's face it, it is mostly rain). This colleague doesn't work on the library but was there to offer a helping hand and to watch and learn. He saw an interaction between one of the visitors to the library, who pops by regularly, and Sam, the Turn A Corner manager.

This visitor, who we will call Jakub, was keen to give Sam a copy of that day's (free, and freely available) Metro newspaper. Sam initially declined it, saying she would pick one up herself later. Then, there was a pause and Sam changed her response, readily accepting it, enthusing about how she was looking forward to reading a particular column and thanking him wholeheartedly for giving her the paper. What Sam recognised in that moment was that this exchange was not about the newspaper, this was about Jakub wanting to do something for her, to be in the position of the giver, not the receiver. This was about dignity.

This exchange reminded me of the story about how the timebank movement was founded. A man called Edgar Cahn found himself unexpectedly in a hospital bed, after a heart attack. He was a successful lawyer in the USA, who had started his career under Robert Kennedy, clearly a mover and a shaker. While he was profoundly grateful for the care he was receiving, he felt diminished by being a patient. He reflected 'That was 1980 and we were declaring all kinds of people useless – the old, the young, those who were laid off in Detroit, those in Appalachia, those who were disabled. I thought, I bet they don't like being useless either.'³

He realised that he had hit upon a truth wider than his own experience and set up the timebank movement that put a value on the non-monetary economy. Someone may not have money but they might have skills and time, which they could contribute and trade. This was about dignity too.

I talked to David Robinson, the founder of the Relationships Project,⁴ about this idea of dignity. He reflected that anti-poverty is a familiar phrase but anti-indignity is not and observes that it hooks us into 'thinking about poverty and justice and all those other well-worn ideas from a fresh perspective' going on to note that "'for" ideas are often more motivating than "against" ideas. Is it "anti-indignity" or maybe "pro-dignity"?. This struck me as very insightful and got me thinking about how we describe our work at QSA, and whether describing our work as anti-poverty is the right thing to do. Yes, it might make it clearer to our financial supporters what

3 Edgar Cahn's obituary can be found at www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2022/01/26/edgar-cahn-legal-services-antioch-dies.

4 More information at <https://relationshipsproject.org>.

the societal ill is that we are using their money to address, but does it get them – and us – thinking in different and inspiring ways?

David's motivation in setting up the Relationships Project, whose strapline is 'building a better society by building better relationships' doesn't just have relevance to how professionals like me can rethink their relationships, but does, I hope, have wider resonance. We are all social animals, engaging with our neighbours and communities, and I'd imagine most of us like to think that we're doing good. Are we doing the best thing that we can, though? And are we measuring success by *what* we are doing, and not necessarily *how* we are doing it? I would like to explore both of these possibilities by unpacking two different concepts a bit more: proximity and love.

Proximity

This summer, a QSA project is coming to a close. Move On Up was a housing project for young adult carers, young adults aged between eighteen and twenty-six who had significant experience of caring for a family member, either as a child or a young adult. This experience can leave a real mark on a young person, who often has to grow up quickly, and becomes old beyond their years, as they can carry a lot of responsibility on their shoulders. It can affect their schooling, their confidence and of course their own mental health. And, as their peers grow up, move out and get on with their lives, young adult carers can feel stuck and/or ill-equipped to take a leap into the great unknown. There had not been any other housing project in the UK specifically targeted at young adult carers, but we at QSA secured social investment to set one up, with a seven-year loan period.

As the project approaches that seven-year mark and draws to an end, we've sought to capture the learning in all sorts of ways. Possibly the most striking is a podcast⁵ on our website between Lois, the co-manager of Move On Up, and one of our tenants, who is called Tim for the purposes of the interview. Lois's role in the project was to offer support, to seek to get to know our tenants closely and help them navigate this transition into adulthood. I say 'seek' very deliberately because it was not easy for

⁵ See <https://quakersocialaction.org.uk/sharing-our-learning/voices/move-voices-tim>.

our tenants to ask for help, or receive it, and Lois had to use great skills of tenacity and delicacy to build some of these relationships.

In this interview, Lois explores what led Tim to come to Move On Up. In a few simple sentences, he draws a heart-breaking picture of supporting his parents from the age of eight as they battled health conditions. As Lois summarises 'You cared for both of your parents right till the end of their lives and had to say goodbye at a very young age.'

When I first listened to this podcast, I held my breath. The trust between them was palpable. Lois had invested countless hours getting close to Tim. She understood him well because she had proximity.

Proximity is at the heart of the thesis within the latest book by Darren McGarvey, *The Social Distance Between Us*.⁶ McGarvey grew up in Glasgow, in a family and community where hardship, addictions and early deaths were all too common, and very close to home. He has become passionate about how little those who are tasked with building a better society engage meaningfully with those who most desperately need change to happen.

On a political level he suggests 'Could it be that Britain's problem is not that there is a lot of poverty but that we keep putting rich and powerful people in charge of sorting it out?,'⁷ but he brings this thinking to the interpersonal level too, noting that 'Proximity is how close we are to the action and how that affects the way in which we assess, relate and respond to it'.⁸ He goes on to explain that many people in the so-called helping professions, in his view, lack an understanding of the perspective of that person, the hyper-vigilance they will employ to stay safe in the world, and therefore not support them to get what they really need.

In Move On Up, Lois wouldn't have been able to build the bond she did with Tim without investing hugely in building proximity with him. He felt seen, he felt heard, they had trust. It is not my place to describe the emotions of either Lois or Tim within this relationship, but I'd like to

⁶ Darren McGarvey, *The Social Distance Between Us* (Penguin, 2022).

⁷ *Ibid*, p.8.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.5.

use this example as a way into a final reflection, upon a word used very infrequently within my professional life: love.

Love

I recently had the opportunity to visit a neighbouring Hackney based charity, Clapton Commons,⁹ and meet Marcus Duran, who has the wonderful job title of ‘community builder’. We were sitting comfortably, with a coffee, as he described their work, when it became clear his attention was elsewhere. He had invited me at a particular time so that I could see their weekly lunch club in action, but one of their volunteers needed his help. A couple of residents from a nearby care home were keen to get to the lunch club, which they would do on foot (and with mobility aids). Accompanying two residents with mobility needs was a bit too much of a task just for one volunteer.

Marcus and I broke off our chat and went to help her out. I then had the deep pleasure of a slow and gentle walk through the sunshine, offering a steadying hand to a wonderful older lady who we will call Alice. In the course of our journey we chatted about her upbringing in Latin America, her matching lipstick and nail varnish, but mostly about how much she was looking forward to getting to our destination. When we got there, she lit up, brought to life by the chat, the company, the relaxing and accommodating vibe. It was a busy and bustling environment, facilitated mostly by volunteers.

As I walked home afterwards, I felt profoundly moved when I reflected upon all of the other lunch clubs and the sports clubs and the myriad other ways in which people volunteer their time to just offer a helping hand to someone else, at all times of the day and night, all around the year and indeed all around the planet. There are many ways that this free gift of time could be described, and the impact it can have on those who benefit from it, but the word that came to my mind was love.

Love isn’t a word that crops up very often when talking about how to tackle social problems. And it’s definitely an idea that needs careful handling, especially in a professional capacity, where there is clearly a need for

⁹ More information at www.claptoncommons.org.

boundaries, to protect and safeguard all parties. A more palatable concept might be that of 'unconditional regard'. This is probably a more comfortable concept for many. It offers us the idea that to really be of help to others we need to be willing not just to see them as their unique self but also to avoid judgement of their behaviour. Someone who is struggling will encounter a lot of conditionality when they seek help: have these benefits if you do X, get this further support if you do Y, qualify for additional resources if you do Z. Some of this conditionality is necessary but often it is not and can feel disproportionate and dehumanising. So, the more opportunities we have within civil society to offset the harm from that, the better. We can offer something with no strings attached.

It also intersects with the concept of dignity too, as Marcus himself notes, when he reflects upon the journey that Alice makes, one that takes us twenty minutes together, but travelling alone would take only three. Marcus says 'it has become apparent to me that the short walk represents not only a steep physical challenge but a spiritual and psychological opportunity too. The opportunity is for Alice to embody in her community her own independence and self-dignity, however fragile this might appear at times... Alice's personal circumstances crossing the common raise the importance of how the smallest actions can bring the greatest civility and humanity into the detail of our work. Other structures of support in Alice's life have sadly, it would seem, made an unknowing attempt to prevent her from having this 'embodied' moment of dignity each week. For my part as well, I have sometimes caught my own inner-voice trying to scorn this slow-paced-accompaniment as 'not best use of my work time'. All of these counterpoints try and then fail to eclipse the true power of what Alice has chosen to invite and receive into her life each week: the power to enact her own dignity.'¹⁰

Final reflections

To return to the title of this piece, the idea of taking the non-problem seriously, it is essential that we at QSA take the problem very seriously too. This is true across the board for all the work we do, but perhaps particularly so with our work at Down to Earth, which supports bereaved people with their need for an affordable and meaningful funeral. Others within these

¹⁰ Marcus Duran, in a personal email to me reflecting on his work.

pages will be writing more fully on the subject of death and dying, and this is a subject very close to our hearts at QSA and one which fits in well with the three themes of dignity, proximity and love.

When someone contacts us at Down to Earth they do so because they sense, or know, that they cannot pay for a loved one's funeral. That brings with it such a sense of shame and often a deep fear of judgement. The overwhelming emotion that comes out of the feedback we receive is a sense of relief, washing over someone, that the help they received was given without judgement. When we first started Down to Earth, we envisioned it as a very localised project, where we would be proximate to the people who accessed the service and would be a font of knowledge about local provision: the funeral directors, crematorium and cemeteries. But then word started to spread and we received calls from different parts of the country and so we carefully transitioned into what we are today: a national helpline. Our deepest concern was that we would lose this proximity but we haven't, or rather, where this proximity comes from is not our local knowledge at all, but our ability to really connect and care for the person we're supporting. Proximity of the heart, in essence.

Conclusions

One of the most liberating things I have recently learned, from thinking harder about equity, diversity and inclusion work within QSA, is the idea of 'learning and unlearning'. This exemplifies that the world changes and that we need to change with it, giving up on certain fixed ideas and habits and embracing new ones. The way we engage with the world shouldn't really be like how I engage with Hallowe'en, same routines, same habits, year after year, but evolving and developing.

There is an approach that is used in the social justice world called 'ABCD': asset-based community development. This proposes that instead of having a deficit model and looking at problems and needs, we look instead at assets and unrealised potential and this is where we focus our energies. My proposal here is that we do so, bringing along with us the three additional tools of dignity, proximity and love.

As a final thought though, there may be another ingredient missing altogether here, and indeed it is an idea that aligns with why we at QSA don't just deliver practical support services, but also speak truth to power. This piece could have been a long litany of examples, backed up by data, of what we see each day at QSA, the experience of people struggling with unimaginable pressures and anxieties as the cost-of-living crisis continues to bite.

As David Robinson of the Relationship Project notes, 'When we talk about people "keeping their dignity" we usually mean that all else is lost. This makes me wonder about how dignity intersects with rights and social justice and campaigning activity? Again, my instant word association leads me to think about the old man in a freezing home who still wears a tie and polishes his shoes, the widowed mother who walks 10km for water every day, etc – people who cope stoically and without complaint in impossible circumstances. Perhaps the world would be better if they, and we, were a bit less dignified and a bit more angry?'