

## **Not-for-profit values under threat**

### **Notes from a talk given to the AGM of Volunteering Canterbury**

**30<sup>th</sup> July 2007**

**Tony Paine**

E ka mana, e ka reo, e ka waka o ka hau e wha  
Tena koutou, tena koutou tena ra tatou katoa

Today I want to try and do two things...

One, talk about values that are important to me and that I think are relevant to our sector- not because I want to in any way be prescriptive or to turn this into a sermon... but to set up a context and provide some useful examples that I hope will help us consider the ways our values in our organisations are at risk.

And that's the second thing I want to do - I want to talk about some of what I see as real threats to these values in our world and work in the voluntary sector.

So - here , for what it is worth, is a summary of values that came to my mind when I tried to name the important features of my value-landscape

The first is the importance of understanding and honouring diversity - this is a biological concept -diversity is what makes ecosystems strong - but it is also what makes communities strong - surely at the heart of all current world conflict is an intergenerational intolerance of diversity and a lack of understanding of the wealth and contribution of all parts of the rich variety that makes up the human tapestry.

The second is one that I've rather inelegantly named as "access/equity": the deep requirement for every human to be able to participate, be involved, to live a rich life, to have a fair share of resources both physical and intangible, to contribute, to make their own way in the world - it is the quality at the heart of our commitment to fairness and

justice – in this country that implies a response to ideas of sovereignty and nationhood and acknowledgement of status and contributions of mana whenua.

Thirdly, I would place sustainability on my list – it's a corollary of diversity – it means we are playing the long game – implies caretaking on behalf of future generations – also implies a call to simplicity, the sharing and guardianship of scarce resources

Fourth is the power of conversation/dialogue – it's the only way to deal with the challenges of diversity – we need to learn to talk to each other and to unequivocally commit to talk as being the only legitimate tool for building community and resolving conflict – be it on a global scale or two neighbours arguing about a fence... This value endorses the power of conversation to help people, to strengthen relationships and build strong, diverse, just communities, organisations and nations – and it is under huge threat – a threat we see in the public domain through quasi-dialogue marked by oversimplification, entrenched positions, talking past each other, premature resource to litigation, violence, political posturing, incivility, point scoring, blaming, fake consultation processes, and feelings of powerless in face of bureaucratic and political power...

I would argue that it is dialogue that sustains the ties that bind. Conversations marked by generosity, freedom from ego, a joint willingness to seek positive outcomes, to be creative and innovative and to avoid animosity, distortion and superficiality...it is the only real alternative we have to resolving conflict by force (either physical, emotional or moral) and that immediately raises the issue of how to provide people with equal access to public conversations – especially those rendered less articulate by disability/oppression/access to resources

The fifth and final value I want to uphold – and in this list the last is by no means the least - is the strength that resides in communities/families – our social capital if you like – the connections among individuals, our social networking and the norm of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.

It is in community(in every sense of the word) where I find my most important personal value - the power and absolute centrality of love – in action. The moments and acts,

large and small, heroic and common place, of sharing, sacrifice, and of mutual support that bind us together to create true community ... the places where the power of love emerges in our relationships with our families, our neighbours, our communities, our nation and our world. And I know – particularly standing here today that this value is far from dead – it is the cake left on a grieving neighbour's doorstep – it is random acts of kindness, it is our almost pathological desire to join committees, we participate, and indeed you are living proof of that - we contribute – we volunteer...

Now, you will of course have your own list of important values and I hope that high on the agenda of the organisations you work with is the naming and framing of these values. You'll have your own list... and in one sense it doesn't matter much what is on the list or what words we use but on the fact that there is a list and that we see it as being central to our organisational and social well being... as I said before the voluntary sector only exists to uphold and bring to life and reality, values...

And yet we live in an age where values are seldom talked about, seldom made explicit, and often under threat....

Over the last couple of years I was lucky enough to have some time – through a Masters I did at Waikato to consider some of the things that might render it harder for us in the voluntary sector to bring our values to life and to keep them at the heart of all that we do...

So what threatens or weakens these values?

A German thinker called Jurgen Habermas offered a distinction that helps... system/lifeworld.... By the System he means the features of our world connected to the apparatus of the state and the economy (the market, the media, bureaucracy, the processes of capital) by the lifeworld he means the important places of humanity and life – places of consensus building, where we can name and transmit values to our children, where our relationships thrive, and where we have an unfettered ability to collectively decide what is the truth and what is important) And Habermas says that the lifeworld is being colonised by the system – that the systems ways of doing things

are invading the lifeworlds ways of doing things and that our humanity and community is increasingly being constrained – the spaces to be human are shrinking...

And this is clearly true in the voluntary sector. You'll know that as the well documented encroachment of market models on human service provision – phrases like “rogeronomics and ruthenasia” come to mind, and while these terms have become old hat the ideas behind them are still alive and well...

I'd like to suggest that they constrain our work and our ability to give life to our values in a number of places... I want to talk about three – the rise of an orientation towards customers, our current approach to quality, and the impact of 'market forces'...

To take each in turn...

### **customer**

Over the last couple of decades the customer metaphor has become increasingly pervasive... and while you could probably mount an argument that it hasn't really even served our interests in the retail sector, its application in the not-for-profit sector – especially health has been disastrous – a negative effect made even more pernicious by the almost intuitive appeal that seeing the people we work with as customers has – surely this is a method of empowerment a new form of accountability. I would answer no - The application of customer rights, especially in the health sector simply encourages us to miss the full person – health and social service organisations need to deal with whole human beings not customers with rights under consumer rights legislation – it leads to blanket approaches to individual concerns: fails to address the complex, unique, individual reality of people's lives, ignores the absence of real choice, ironically implies a passivity that simply isn't helpful - I don't want to be treated as a customer when I go to hospital – I'm less concerned with the code of customer rights on the wall and the consumer feedback form than the quality of the interaction and the quality and qualifications of people

Begs the question of who is the customer (individuals, families the whole community, future generations)

Makes it easy to focus on cosmetics – have a nice day

### **quality**

The second area where we've seen a threat to our values has been in the weird and wonderful world of the approach to quality – especially from the industry that has developed around audit.

The quality of what we do has been redefined – it is no longer about the values I talked about earlier but is now a calculus of means and ends – defined by check lists “audit culture” – the ubiquitous accountant – institutional autism – collect, collate but no emotion, no interest in empathic experience, no tolerance of doubt/uncertainty, no room for heart and soul...

An example of this that sticks in my mind was when – in a previous role – I had a compliance and accountability visit from a representative of a govt funding agency... would you like, I asked this person, to come and meet some of the staff or even perhaps we could arrange for you to talk with some of the people who we were working with – “no thank you that wont be necessary” – there was a check list you see – a series of boxes to be ticked... I am still in awe of an agency who think that inspecting whether we had a lockable filing cabinet (which they did indeed do) was more pressing or more of a priority than talking to people

### **Market Forces...**

In addition to the two key areas of customer service and quality where I think the attack on values has been particularly corrosive there are a range of features associated with what we have all come to know as market forces: - and even in our sector which has traditionally stood outside the market I know that we can all point to examples of their impact – often through the adoption and promulgation of a

**market driven approach by the state and our funders – has encroached and indeed become central to our world**

Lets pause for a moment and consider the phrase “market forces” – we all know what they mean, but note how impersonal the language is – as if the ‘market’ – the world of systems, allocation of resources through competition, allegiance to shareholders as opposed to accountability to community, a place where the cost of everything is as well known as the value of everything is ignored – as if the market exists and has a life outside of the people who are running it – nothing could be further from the truth – when we say our not-for-profit aims, objectives and aspirations are at times threatened or compromised by ‘market forces’ its important to remember that what we really mean is that we are being threatened or forced to compromise in response to the actions and values of other people – people who I would argue we need to engage with and include in the conversations I spoke of earlier

Some of the features of the encroachment of market values and the people who promote them in our sector:

Competition as arbiter of allocation of resources – creation of quasi markets – where one part of an organisation sells to another or health boards are expected to return a profit to government (or more recently but perhaps just as insidiously have to live within an arbitrary and very limited budget) – is highly problematic – we’ve seen the results - waiting lists become political play things

The arrival of managers in all their glory is another feature – I have to be careful here – when people ask me what I do one of the things I’m likely to say (and its how I’m described on the electoral roll!) is that I’m a manager... but throughout the 80s and I would argue still today, we have seen the rise of a class of staff member whose roll is to organise and control the work others – and that as that activity is currently understood includes a whole range of activities that might sound positive but which underneath are really about getting other people to do the things we want them to do... as soon as you hear a manager talking about effectiveness there’s a real risk that what they are actually

talking about is ways of manipulating other human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour.

Its lead to what in my view is the highly problematic and much overrated world of human resource management – (once again think about the words) and the weird and wonderful world of mission and vision statements, staff engagement, building organisational culture, token performance appraisals... and while that excess has not taken root in most of the voluntary sector its certainly alive and well in health, central and local government and perhaps some of the bigger organisations in our sector

Thirdly Concepts of effectiveness and efficiency have increasingly become central – and of course its important that we manage our meager resources wisely but the risk is that we start treating people (staff and people we work with) 'instrumentally' as a means to an end, our success comes back to counting (number of clients seen.. the number of counseling sessions... what our "outcomes" are) – policy analysts in Wellington now talk about an 'intervention logic' for heavens sake to describe the things service providers do... in the end it means that our focus and energy is drawn from our mission to our operations and from our people to our systems – of course it is important to pay attention to efficiency and to be accountable but the risk is that cash and contracts replace care and concern as the foundation of relationships... we spend more and more time and energy on creating systems (contract reporting, accountability, performance management etc etc) and less on creating and building relationships and dealing with people both within and without of our organisation

Now I am, of course, deliberately painting a stark and perhaps overly critical picture of the impact of the market on our world but I do so for good reason – because I think we are – as a society - at risk of losing sight of what really matters. And I would argue that it is values that should be driving us – not market forces. So what we need to apply to these matters is a healthy skepticism and a clear and unequivocal advocacy for the values that lead to the creation of our organisations in the first place. That really does

require us to be persistent in our questioning of attempts to introduce things that might threaten our real mission

So how might we reclaim and reassert the role of values in our organisations?

The power of talk – generous spirit – naming/shaming of paradox/irony/silliness – if something seems a bit *dopey* then it probably is and its probably worth saying so – that's the power of the story I told about lockable filing cabinets

Values clarity – organisational values I suggest that not for profits should spend considerably more time and energy on naming and thinking about their values and making sure that everything they do, every process every decision every strategy can be clearly linked to values...

Because what we are trying to do is too important not to see in this way. Think about what we are trying to achieve: We set out to 'help' another person or group of people. In our attempts to improve someone's quality of life, to raise them up, to help them create connections, find meaning or improve competence. In our attempts to help someone make their way in the world, to participate, to find peace of mind or meaning or community. In our attempts to ensure that people are treated fairly and equitably. In our attempts to feed the hungry, house the homeless, comfort the sad. They are our acts of nurture, love, caring and trust. They are our work for peace, justice and the environment...

By and large these efforts and interactions are deeply dependent on our clarity and commitment to our values and they are not helped – indeed I hope I may have persuaded you that they are hindered by the arbitrary encroachment of people who suggest that the disciplines and values and processes used to manage the economy or profitable enterprise will improve our efforts to improve our world...

Indeed my final point is that it should be the other way round – we need to advance the position that the values that guide the voluntary sector – the primacy of people, the

fullness of humanity expressed in community and interaction, that in fact it is these values that need to guide and restrain the processes used to manage the economy and for-profit enterprise.... At the end of the day Telecom and Treasury have more to learn from the Girl Guides and Presbyterian Support than the other way around. We have much work to do to create a world where that reorientation can take place.

Tony Paine

Contact 027 2460177