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REFLECTIONS

The Perception Factor: A Personal Journey

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My entire professional career, spanning 40+ years, has focused on working to understand and meet the needs of people I perceived to be less fortunate. I asked: What can I do to make a positive difference in their lives?

As I reflect back on my career, I have come to understand how limiting this question is, especially in relation to the significance of my own life.

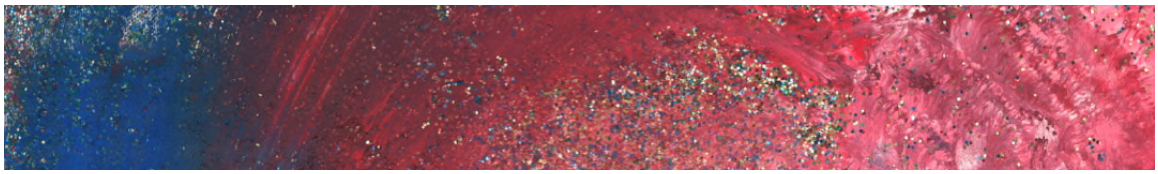
Perceptions of vulnerable people

Perceptions by family and community members can help ensure their significance as a valued family member, friend, and neighbor—as someone whose daily life is making a contribution to the well-being of others. Or the opposite can happen.

Much has been written about perceptions of vulnerable people. In 1997 my colleagues David Hopping and Judith Pintar, writing about the systemic challenges Hope Meadows was designed to address, noted that "traumatized children are often treated as damaged individuals who receive psychological treatment in isolation."

Seventeen years later, on September 3, 2014, Jude Meyers Thomas, another friend, wrote in a blog for *Changing Aging*: "Our society sees people living with limitations as being less worthy and our culture pressures us to segregate them from the ordinary rhythms of daily life."

These commonly and long-held perceptions serve as the basis for most policies and social programs. The resulting segregation keeps us apart and from forming a different perspective.



"Sun in Space" Original artwork by Jonathan Finck.

"Where is our Jonathan?"

In contrast to these perceptions of vulnerable people as damaged, less worthy, and needing to be segregated, Deb Finck presents a positive point of view. Deb is working to establish *Ohana Village,* a community for young adults with disabilities which is based on the *Generations of Hope* model of neighborhood care. Her son is nonverbal and lives with profound autism in his parents' loving home.

> *In his school, Jonathan's best buddies are "higher functioning" kids and some are affected with developmental differences. They recognize in Jonathan a great kid who needs friends just like they do. They miss him when he's not in school, and ask, "Where is our Jonathan?" Apparently he contributes to their lives, and they know this.*
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> *They like to help him, too. He needs encouragement, and sometimes a helping hand. They offer patience, smiles and pats on the back. They talk to him, and walk him from class to class, because without them, he might get lost. In return, they seem to be proud of their own contributions to his life, and that is life-changing for them.*
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> *I don't want Jonathan to believe he isn't important in the lives of others. I don't believe it, even when it appears that all he does is need and need and need. This is an illusion, because Jonathan actually blesses everyone in his life. Some people are better equipped to see this than others, but it is always true.*

The idea of significance

David Racine, a colleague, has yet another perspective on the lives of vulnerable people. He writes about how society regards the significance of older adults and contrasts this with perceptions held of the older adults at *Hope Meadows*:

> *Society segregates older people, and this denies them moral significance.*

Society segregates older people, not just physically, but in many other ways too, and this denies them moral significance… Nothing much is expected of older people. They have no real duties or responsibilities to others. Their significance is largely honorary, like a plaque on the wall – a reminder of the active, productive person they once were. But, this is a weak, superficial sort of significance. People's lives have real significance for them only when they are engaged in doing things they and others can regard as significant.

What makes Hope Meadows special is that it enables older people to have significance in large part as a function of age. Retirees can do all sorts of things of significance in their communities, but much of the time these things can also be (and often are) done by other, non-retired people as well. Retirees who volunteer in schools, for example, are not providing a service that depends on their age or extensive experience. The service they provide is a good thing. It has significance. But, they do it mainly because they have the time, not so much because of who they are.

At Hope Meadows, by contrast, you encourage your older residents to occupy roles and engage in activities that reflect and even amplify their standing as seniors. As a result, their whole lives have significance, not just their specific activities.

Being a part of something

Older adults at *Hope Meadows* will tell you their lives have been transformed by *helping* and *being with* children who had been severely abused or neglected. As one said, "I know the primary focus is on the children, but they also make us feel so good because they are concerned about us. Because of them, we feel a part of something." Similarly, Jonathan's friends like helping and being with him, and they are proud of this reciprocal relationship.

A child hitches a ride with a disabled veteran "grandparent" at Hope Meadows.

As I, and my friends and colleagues around the country, work to create a new way to live through *Generations of Hope Communities*,

we begin with the core belief that everyone's life has significance and meaning when we change our perceptions of what it means to be vulnerable – when, as we put forward, "You look through a different lens," or as Jonathan's mother writes, "We think differently about our relationships and responsibilities to one another." But how does this transformation in perception happen?

A common journey

The people of *Hope Meadows* and Deb, through their own daily journeys helping and being with people living with limitations, have come to understand the profound significance of viewing those who are perceived to be "vulnerable," not as problems to be managed, but as caring and contributing members of society - as individuals whose lives have meaning and purpose and who give our lives meaning and purpose.

As for me personally, I began my journey thinking about what I could do to make a difference in the lives of some very vulnerable children. I did not see a reciprocal beneficial relationship. It took the older people at *Hope Meadows* (some who are now in their 90s and still enriching lives including mine), Jonathan, the children who came to *Hope Meadows* with very troubled pasts, and so many others to help me realize how much people who are viewed as less fortunate than I have increased the significance of my own life. I have come to realize how much my perceptions of people with limitations have changed.

This has happened by simply getting to know them, by working with them, and by enjoying being with them, sharing hugs and laughter, triumphs and disappointments, and care and concern. This sharing of daily life ultimately changed the way we thought and acted in relations to each other. Perhaps this is best summed up by a *Hope Meadows* resident: "The people who live here have a different attitude. We all want to do something; we go out of our way to know and help each other. We have become family."

In reflecting upon my life's journey, I no longer ask, "What can I do to make a positive difference in the lives of those I perceive to be vulnerable?" I now ask, "How are others enriching my life, giving it purpose and meaning –giving it real significance?" And I also ask, "What can I do to help others find real significance in their own lives by changing their perception of what it means to be vulnerable?" To answer these questions, everything points to bringing people together to build social relationships.